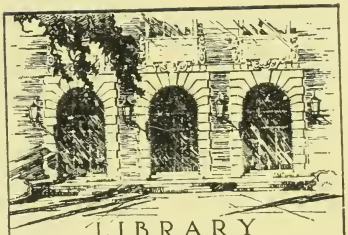

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Under One Roof

THIRD VOLUME

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UNDER ONE ROOF

An Episode in a Family History

BY

JAMES PAYN

AUTHOR OF 'BY PROXY' 'LESS BLACK THAN WE'RE PAINTED' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES—VOL. III.

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UNDER ONE ROOF.

CHAPTER I.

A NIGHT CHASE.

Six days out of the seven had elapsed without any tidings from Sir Robert reaching Halcombe, and two at least of the little household were growing very impatient to discover the mystery that had gathered round him. It was with difficulty, as we have seen, that Gresham had been persuaded to suffer so considerable a time to pass in inaction, and to Lady Arden this passiveness was well-nigh intolerable. To her, Sir Robert's silence appeared absolutely unaccountable, except on the ground of his being too ill to write, or on that of his letters having

been intercepted. To have suddenly changed his intention of leaving one hemisphere for the other, and then to have even returned to England without informing her of the fact, was an act of neglect, and even cruelty, with which she refused to credit him. That he was not, morally speaking, his own master, was true enough; but no malign influence of a mere moral kind, could, she felt, have induced him to thus behave to her. He must be under not only dictation, but restraint; or he must be utterly prostrated by illness.

As time went on, these convictions began to be more and more shared by the rest of the family; and even Gresham, notwithstanding Mr. Bevill's concurrence with his own judgment, began to doubt of its wisdom.

On the seventh morning it had been arranged that the detective was to come over to the Hall to receive his last instructions; and so impatient were the two young men that on his not putting in an appearance immediately after breakfast they set out in the dog-cart to meet

him. They had passed through the Wilderness and reached the moorland, when they saw a horseman coming from the direction of Mirton, and at once concluded that it was he; but on his coming nearer they saw that he was a stranger; he had an olive complexion with long and pointed moustachios, and, except that he had so good a seat on his horse, might have been taken for a Frenchman. He raised his hat, too, in foreign fashion as they met, and then passed on. It seemed unlikely that he should be bound for any place but the Hall, and no sooner had they parted than it struck them that he might be the bearer of some message which might relieve the common anxiety. Gresham accordingly pulled up, and was about to hail him, when he saw that the stranger had also reined in his steed, and was turning back.

'Could you happen to tell me, gentlemen,' said he, in broken English, 'whether I am on the right road for Halcombe Hall?'

'Yes, yes,' said Gresham, eagerly; 'have

you any message for any of the family? I am Sir Robert Arden's nephew.'

'My business is with one Mistarre—Mistarre—ah! *oui*—Mistarre Mayne.'

'I am the man, sir,' cried Mayne, eagerly. 'What have you to say to me?'

'Merely that I am ready to start for Weymouth,' answered the supposed foreigner, with a suppressed grin.

'Confound the fellow! it's Bevill,' cried Mayne. 'Why, you would deceive the very devil.'

'I hope to deceive my gentleman, who is next kin to him,' answered the agent, drily. 'I thought it was inexpedient to come to the Hall in my own proper person; and now that I have met you I will, with your permission, not go there at all: it is better to be on the safe side.'

'But how will you get back to Mirton without being recognised?'

'A handful of water from the first pool and a twitch at these moustachios will make Richard

himself again,' returned Mr. Bevill, coolly. 'In the meantime I wait your instructions.'

These were soon given; indeed, they consisted mainly in impressing on him the anxiety that prevailed in the family, and the necessity of relieving it as soon as possible. He was to telegraph to them, though in guarded terms, every point that seemed of importance; and Gresham would hold himself in readiness to join him at a moment's notice.

It is a vulgar error to ascribe any great intelligence to the mimetic art, even when displayed in its higher walks; like the business of the conjuror, and of the statesman, it is magnified by the majority of mankind, because they are necessarily unacquainted with it; but the effect of Mr. Bevill's masquerading was to impress both the young men with a sense of his sagacity, and to convince them that he would leave nothing undone, through lack of strategy and prudence, in the matter entrusted to him. When he had left them they began to feel that sort of complacency which we experience, even

under the most menacing circumstances, when we know that we have at least taken every precaution possible, and, if things go wrong, it must be owing to the malignity of fate. And this feeling they imparted in some measure to the rest of the household.

For the first time for many days Lady Arden was able to listen to the words of wisdom that fell from the Great Baba with something like her old appreciation; for the pretty prattle of the nursery, though it never loses its music for the mother's ear, has, when her heart is sore and sad, a pathos that melts what is wax already, and gives to grief its hesitating tear.

With an inopportuneness characteristic of its age, the child, too, would generally choose Sir Robert for the topic of its talk, and this his deserted consort found intolerable.

That evening, however, Lady Arden joined the rest of the family (which included, it should be mentioned, that newly-joined devotee, Mr. Frederic Mayne) in their usual acts of idolatry;

and the Great Baba, in the drawing-room before the late dinner, was more adorable than ever.

His brother Frank had a tame starling; and he stated at immense length how he, too, intended to procure a feathered pet, and by what means. Salt, as a device for placing on birds' tails, and so securing them, he had, he explained, hitherto found illusory; the birds were too rapid in their movements; but he (Baba) had observed [this with all the grave simplicity of a White of Selborne describing a fact in Natural History] that the goose was the most slow moving of all birds, and a goose he accordingly meant to catch, and put it in a cage to sing to dear papa when he came home.

This statement, delivered with the most unconscious comicality, was supplemented by a request that 'Georgie dear' (Gresham) should indicate upon the instant *which* goose in Gilbert Holm's collection he considered would be most eligible for this experiment.

In vain did Gresham aver with much emotion (he was half suffocated with suppressed

mirth, and nothing made the Great Baba so wroth—except contradiction—as laughing at him) that he did not know one goose from another; nothing would satisfy the exacting infant, or induce him to retire to his couch, until Gresham had passed his word that he would visit the farmyard and investigate this weighty matter that very night.

Out of which absurd agreement a strange event came to pass, which set many minds at work, and added the glamour of mystery to the gloom that already shadowed Halcombe Hall.

After the ladies had retired that night, Gresham bethought him of his promise, which could fortunately be kept in all its integrity by the young men's visiting the Curate, and smoking a pipe with him at the Manor Farm, as they often did. After an hour's chat and smoke, they were returning through the shrubbery, when Gresham suddenly stopped, and pointed out to his friend that, though the rest of the house was in dark-

ness, there was a light in Sir Robert's dressing-room.

'But why should there not be?' inquired Mayne.

'I know Lady Arden has never entered the room since my uncle left us,' returned Gresham. 'And she told Evelyn that she never—— Good Heavens! look yonder.'

'What is it? I only see three windows lighted up instead of two.'

'That is just the wonder of it. There are only two windows to all appearance in that dressing-room, though there are three when looked at from outside. The third gives light to only what is called the "Priest's hole"—a hiding-place, no doubt, for the family confessor in the Jacobite times. Its very existence is unknown, except to the members of the family. One has to stand on the broad window-ledge, and open a sort of cupboard with a spring. Sir Robert keeps his private papers there, I believe.'

'Then it is probably Lady Arden herself.'

'No, no,' interrupted Gresham, hastily; 'don't speak, don't move. We must get at the bottom of this; no woman could have reached the place without great difficulty; see, that is a man's shadow!'

'By Jingo, so it is!' exclaimed the other. The head and shoulders of a man with one projecting arm, as though he were taking something from this secret repository, could be now distinctly seen. Then the candle that had revealed him was suddenly extinguished, and all was dark again.

'There is a thief in the house,' whispered Gresham, in great excitement; 'and I am sure it is none of its inmates. He must therefore break cover somewhere or another; either at the back or front; if you will run round to the stable-yard, I will stand here, and we will give the alarm to one another. Walk softly on the grass, and—hush, listen! By Jove, there he is.'

The lifting of a window somewhere on the lower floor was distinctly heard, and then a

figure dashed across the lawn within a hundred feet of them, and sped along the avenue.

The young men darted after it like two arrows discharged by a single string, and three pairs of winged feet broke the silence of the night together by their patter on the gravel. All three were good runners; but the stranger had two advantages over his pursuers—he had not dined so recently, and he was not wearing evening boots of polished leather. These latter were no obstruction to the young gentlemen's progress on the gravelled avenue; but when they had shot through the lodge gates, and found themselves on the steep and slippery village street, their footing became insecure. They could not 'take off' from the toe, which is necessary to a very high rate of speed, because their boot-soles, save the high heels, became as unelastic as wet blocks of patent blotting paper. And yet after the first fifty yards they gained upon the flying foe. This, though they did not know it, was because they had youth upon their side—an excellent ally while he sticks to you,

though at bottom always a deserter. When the supposed thief had reached the spot where the moss-grown stocks stood opposite the blacksmith's shop, his pursuers were flying by the village inn, and when he sped by the cattle-pound, they were racing past the stocks. This was a gain of full five yards.

'If Dyneley was here he would have had him by this time,' panted Gresham.

'We shall have him ourselves in ten minutes,' responded Mayne.

An interchange of ideas which cost them—that is, lost them—at least four feet.

At the cattle-pound the road turned sharp to the right, and then to the right again, up to the moor, and at the first bend on the left was the bridle road into the Wilderness.

They ran right on to the second bend before they discovered—by stopping and listening—that their man was behind them. He had taken the bridle road. This 'check' might have been fatal to them; but at this moment the full moon came out, showing each branch and

leaflet as clearly as at noon day, and also the object of their pursuit, straining up the grass-grown road a hundred yards in front of them. There was but one abrupt turn in this road, and then a straight run on to the moor.

'We have got him,' said each young fellow to himself, for bountiful Nature had just given to each his 'second wind,' and it was plain by his style of going that the fugitive had no such auxiliary. He had begun to 'wobble' in his gait, which is a very bad sign, and signifies, among other things, as I happen to know, that the runner is past his prime. They calculated, and with reason, though they would necessarily lose sight of him for a minute or so at the turning, that when they reached it he would be only half his present distance ahead of them. And they were right. Indeed, he was leading by considerably less than fifty yards—but then he was on horseback. He had evidently left his steed tied up at this concealed spot, in readiness for some such emergency as had occurred, and the result had justified his precaution.

He was cantering away from them as leisurely as a railway train from a couple of cows, and they perceived at once that further pursuit was useless.

The young men flopped down on the wayside, and gazed after the vanishing figure, with gasps and gurgles. Their neat evening costumes were in a pretty state; their great coats lay somewhere in the mire, where they had thrown them, as a ship throws over her ballast, anywhere; their boots were split and sloppy, and they had run a mile from home at midnight for nothing. The first use to which Mayne put his recovered breath was to burst out laughing.

'We thought we were so cocksure of him,' said he; 'didn't we!'

But Gresham did not even give an answering smile.

'You saw that scoundrel pull up his coat collar as he rode off,' observed he, earnestly. 'Do you know why he did that?'

'No; how should I?' returned the other; 'he couldn't have been *cold*, that's certain.'

'Well, he did it to escape recognition: that was Ferdinand Walcot.'

CHAPTER II.

BLACK NEWS.

THE astonishment which had been the portion of Mr. Frederic Mayne consequent on the events of the last twenty minutes was as nothing compared with the amazement with which he listened to his companion's last observation.

'No, my dear Gresham, I can't stand that,' he answered. 'I can only just credit that I am sitting here on a damp bank, with my clothes torn, after chasing a burglar by moonlight; to ask me to believe that that burglar was Ferdinand Walcot is to overdraw the small balance of credulity I have still on hand. Let it even be granted that he should come to rob the house, in this inexplicable manner, I could still

never be brought to admit that dear Uncle Ferdy could run like that.'

'As cowards will fight with a rope round their necks,' observed Gresham, gravely, 'so even elderly gentlemen will make use of their legs when to be caught is ruin. Of course under the circumstances—midnight and twenty miles an hour—I can't swear to the man's identity, but I am morally convinced of it. I felt it was so all along; but when I saw him pull up the collar of his coat, I said to myself no man but Ferdinand Walcot, being at his last gasp for breath, and with his wits shaken into a hasty pudding, could have thought of such a precaution at such a moment.'

'There is something in that,' replied Mayne, musing; 'but why the deuce didn't you mention it? If I had thought it was Uncle Ferdy, I *must* have caught him. Oh dear, to see him scuttle up the village!'

And Mr. Mayne fell prone upon the bank, to the still further damage of his dress coat, and roared with laughter.

'Yes, it was Walcot,' continued Gresham, meditatively; 'but, unless we could get proof of it, it might do more harm than good to say so. Moreover, it would alarm Lady Arden and the girls exceedingly, as, to say the truth, it does me.'

'How so?' inquired Mayne, quickly. 'Who's afraid of him? I would give a thousand pounds if he would only come again—just once—like a thief in the night. Indeed I don't know why I say *like* a thief—for no doubt he came in that very capacity.'

'I think so too, Mayne,' said Gresham, earnestly, 'and that is what makes the thing so serious. He would never run such a risk, unless for an immense and immediate gain. It is my conviction that some crisis has taken place as respects my unhappy uncle.'

'Indeed that seems very probable,' said Mayne, rising to his feet, and turning with his companion towards home. 'We may in that case hear something decisive in the course of the next twenty-four hours; nothing can be

worse for poor Lady Arden than this state of anxiety and suspense.'

'We always think that till the catastrophe happens,' answered Gresham, gloomily; 'then we find the worst is to know the worst. I own to you, Mayne, that I have a deep presentiment of evil as regards Sir Robert.'

'Half the unhappiness in the world,' answered Mayne, philosophically, 'arises from presentiments—speculating for the fall, as Mr. Bevill calls it. For my part I am morally certain not only that Uncle Ferdy will eventually come to grief, and that I shall live to see it, but that Sir Robert will 'enjoy his own again,' as the song says.

'The song, however, you remember was wrong,' remarked Gresham, drily. 'However, it is well, of course, and one's duty, to keep a good heart. In the meantime silence will be our best plan as regards this night's adventure.'

'I quite agree with you, my dear Gresham, and not only for the sake of the ladies at the Hall. If the hero of to-night is really the man

you suggest, and he suspects us of having identified him, he will expect us to take some important step, or at all events to make a row. Our remaining quiet will puzzle even him. Let us say nothing of what has happened unless we find any of the household suspect it, and in that case only describe our visitor as an ordinary burglar. Only we must brush our own great coats, else old Parker will say, "They was very drunk last night, them two was, and fout on the ground."'

There was no sign, however, that any one at the Hall had been aroused: the young men let themselves in as usual, and with their own hands drew down the window of the dining-room through which the supposed thief had made his exit. Gresham called his friend's attention to the fact that it was the same window through which in summer time Walcot and Sir Robert were wont after dinner to issue on to the lawn. 'He knew that it moved easily, and without noise.'

Mayne nodded acquiescence, and murmured

something in admiration of Uncle Ferdy's excellent memory. Neither of them had much sleep that night. Anxiety as to what the morrow might bring forth kept Gresham's eyes from slumber. Mayne suffered from even a worse foe than sleep. The sense of the ridiculous oppressed him ; 'to see him scuttle up that hill,' he kept saying to himself, and he had to stuff the sheet into his mouth to stifle his untimely mirth.

Nothing did happen on the morrow till its close. Late in the evening a telegram arrived from Mr. Bevill. 'The "Méduse" [this was the trader from Marseilles] 'brought neither of our friends to Weymouth ; this is certain. There were no passengers at all. I do not nevertheless despair of getting hold of one end of the thread within a few hours. If harm had been done I should have learnt it.'

The last two sentences, as all well understood, were put in by the detective by way of sedative. The rest of the message was simply astounding.

'He has killed him!' cried Lady Arden, clasping her hands.

'No, no,' said Mayne. 'It is his own influence that is dying, and he dares not trust Sir Robert to communicate with those who love him. That is why these extraordinary precautions have been taken to conceal their whereabouts. If any calamity had happened, at sea, for example, we must, as Bevill says, have heard of it ere this.'

'But where *can* they be?' reiterated her ladyship.

'Well, they may never have left Marseilles; their appearing to do so may have been a *ruse* to throw Bevill off the scent, although I confess I think it unlikely, that he should have been so hoodwinked. On the other hand, the captain of the ship may have been induced to touch somewhere, and put them on shore—at Gibraltar, for instance—before reaching Weymouth. For my part I feel no whit discouraged. The work has to be done over again, that is all. If they are above ground, Bevill will find them.'

Lady Arden shook her head. The phrase, 'above ground,' which Mr. Mayne had used suggested its alternative.

'He has killed him!' she repeated, despairingly.

This unhappy condition of his hostess disturbed the young man exceedingly; he reproached himself with having advised delay, and, by way of penance, resolved to tear himself away from Halcombe, and the sweet flower that bloomed there, and assist Mr. Bevill in his researches in person.

Lady Arden did not oppose this, for she had lost confidence in the detective; but, like the rest, as soon as Mayne was gone, she began to feel his loss. His good sense and sanguine views had acted as a tonic to them in their troubles, and when the doctor who had to be called in to her ladyship next day (as is the way in the country when such an opportunity occurs), 'just looked at' the rest of the family, he said, 'You are all running down like clocks, but especially Miss Milly.'

On the same night a telegram reached the Hall from Mayne, which fulfilled Mr. Bevill's hope that 'one end of the thread' would presently be in his hands, and also afforded some comfort. It appeared certain that Sir Robert was at all events in England. The detective had ferreted out a sailor belonging to the 'Méduse', and left behind—he was probably a runaway—when the vessel returned to France; and he had stated that the two 'gentlemen passengers' had been put ashore, at their own request, somewhere on the English coast—at what place the Frenchman could not tell. They had left the ship in a small boat, which had afterwards returned to it.

The next morning two letters were brought up to Gresham's room, that gentleman, as usual, being late for breakfast: one in Mayne's handwriting, and the other in a hand he did not at the moment recognise. He naturally opened the former first. It detailed the news given in the telegram of the night before, but added for his private eye, if he should think it desirable to

conceal the matter, that the French sailor had described the old gentleman—doubtless meaning Sir Robert—as being deadly ill, which had been the cause of his having been put ashore with his companion.

Then for the first time Gresham began to apprehend the worst. With a certain quickness of action, that signified no eagerness (for he expected nothing), but merely impatience with Fate, he took up the second letter. To his amazement he found this to be from Walcot himself.

'May 21st, Salton Point.

'DEAR SIR,—

'It is with the most poignant sorrow that I have to communicate to you the death of your revered uncle, which took place last night. He had been ailing, as his letters have no doubt informed Lady Arden, for a considerable time; the doctors he consulted on the Continent agreed with his own family physician in the necessity of a complete change of air and scene, and at one time he had actually resolved upon

a voyage to Australia; with the caprice of an invalid, however, he suddenly determined to return to England by sea from Marseilles. On the voyage (we were bound to Weymouth) his symptoms grew so alarming, that I persuaded the captain to put us ashore at this place, where we have since remained.

'I more than once suggested that Lady Arden or yourself should be communicated with, but this he peremptorily declined to permit. Mr. Howard, his medical attendant here—a gentleman who tells me he was at college with you, and whom you will doubtless remember—had hopes of him so late as up to yesterday afternoon. But he finally succumbed to his disease—fatty degeneration of the heart, I understand, a mischief that has been long at work—at 6.45 P.M.

'I am thankful to think that nothing was left undone that could be done to save his life, or alleviate his sufferings. He could not, as I have said, be induced to see you; but your immediate presence *now* here is, I need not

say, very desirable. I propose to return with you, with our precious charge—though, alas! what we so loved in him is now no more—to Halcombe, on the 26th, and have made all arrangements for that purpose; unless you would prefer a later date. I have purposely avoided the use of a mourning envelope, lest it should meet Lady Arden's eye, to whom it is your unhappy privilege to break this sad intelligence.

'I am, dear Sir,

'Yours truly,

'FERDINAND WALCOT.'

Gresham threw on his clothes, and, leaving word that he was gone to breakfast at the Manor Farm, betook himself at once to Dyneley. He needed his advice, of course; but the hope that the Curate might be induced to take upon himself that duty which Walcot had described as his 'privilege,' was the true spur that urged him. The young fellow was brave enough, and had given proofs of it; but he shrank from

all things painful—and, to do him justice, especially from those painful to others; the ocean in its most furious mood was in his eyes a less formidable thing to face than a woman's tears.

While Dyneley read the letter aloud Gresham strode about the farm parlour, putting in his indignant commentaries upon Mr. Walcot's text.

'Did you ever read such a tissue of hypocrisies? His "poignant sorrow" forsooth, as though he had not counted on my poor uncle's death, and very likely hastened it! It is sad, indeed, as you say; but one's anger fairly overcomes one's sorrow in the presence of such duplicity. The idea of his pretending to be unaware whether poor Sir Robert had written to his wife or not when every word must have been dictated by him! Then his daring to talk about "our precious charge"—"though what we loved in him is now no more," pah, it sickens me! Of course, I will go to this place—wherever it is—at once;

but as to breaking the news to poor Lady Arden—I really think, my dear Dyneley, since you are a clergyman, and if you wouldn't mind——'

Dyneley looked up with a surprised air that presently vanished in a sad smile: 'I will see Lady Arden, Gresham, if you wish it; it falls, as you say, within my duty.'

'Thank Heaven!' ejaculated the other, naïvely; 'what a good fellow you are!—I suppose, by the bye—only this man is such an unconscionable rogue—that my poor uncle is really dead! If Walcot has only lied to us in this, as in all else, I would willingly forgive him.'

'No; this is the truth,' said Dyneley thoughtfully; 'looking at it all round, I see no hope of its being otherwise. And mind you, though I share your opinion of this man, you have no right to say he hastened your uncle's end. That is a dangerous thing to say, and, what is more, an unjustifiable one. There has, you see, been a doctor in attendance on him—

do you know the gentleman, by the bye, as is stated here?'

'Yes; I remember Howard: he was in my own year. A very honest fellow I should think, though (like myself) not overburthened with brains.

'A year or two, especially in early manhood, sometimes make a serious difference in a man's character,' observed Dyneley, musing.

'That's true: but I may say—yes, for certain—that Howard could have stooped to nothing, I do not say criminal, but underhand. What has been done—so far as he is concerned—we may take for granted has been done on the square.'

'Very good,' observed the Curate. 'That is worth knowing: it corroborates so far my own view that we should be slow to impute misconduct to any one in this affair, without proof: but there is something wrong as to the date of this letter. It was written on the 21st, and speaks of poor Sir Robert as having "died

last night"; and yet it only reaches you to-day, the 25th.'

'Gad, I never noticed that,' said Gresham: 'it's very queer, to say the least of it. It cannot surely be more than two days' post, if so much.'

'It *is* two days' post, answered the Curate, thoughtfully; 'the envelope tells us that much; the dates 24th and 25th are on it; it could not have been posted, then, till two days after it was written.'

'What an observant fellow you are!' cried Gresham, admiringly. 'I should never have thought of looking at the envelope. Mr. Bevill now would set me down as a born fool.'

'Never mind Mr. Bevill: though I don't say that it is not within the bounds of possibility that we may still require his services. It is your duty, no doubt, to start for Salton at once; I would go with you myself, but that I feel I may be of use to poor Lady Arden, just at present.'

'Of course you will be of use—of the greatest comfort to her, and to the girls also. Evy has often said what a comfort you are, when there is real trouble anywhere.'

'Has she?' exclaimed Dyneley, eagerly. Then hastily added, with a deprecatory smile, 'Well, you know, we clergy are still believed in by the ladies: our experience among the poor is of use to us, for when there is real sorrow, human nature is the same everywhere, and the same sources of comfort——' Here he stopped, for it was plain that his companion was not attending to him: 'What are you looking for, my dear Gresham?'

'Your *Bradshaw*: I've got it now; but, dear me, Salton Point is not in it.'

'I dare say not: there is probably no station there. I don't think I ever heard of the place. See here in the map—you must go to Saltonborough, and then drive over—it looks about six miles. You have just time to sit down and get your breakfast; and be in Mirton to catch the midday coach. I will send round

the dog-cart from the stables to pick you up here.'

'Then you are going to the Hall at once—well, it is best to get these things over. I am awfully obliged to you for taking the matter off my shoulders. I say—you'll make it clear to *all* of them—I mean the girls of course (he was thinking of Elise, but dared not mention her) how it was that I went off without saying good-bye, wont you? Thanks. God bless you, old fellow!'

Then, as he sat down to his meal alone, he murmured—

'What a capital fellow a *good* parson is! I wish Dyneley could have come with me down to Salton Point. Poor old Sir Robert——he was a kind friend to me, in life; whatever happens, I shall never forget that. How wretched it will be down there; and with that infernal scoundrel in the house—— Well, well: I must go through with it.'

CHAPTER III.

SALTON POINT.

THAT Mr. Dyneley 'did not know Salton Point' only proved, not indeed that he was unknown, but that he was of stay-at-home habits, or, at all events, had not travelled much upon the railways or the south coast. To every one that did so, Salton Point has long been a household word, and the place itself perfectly familiar, so far as the art of the painter can make it so. The locality in question had never, it is true, been made the subject of any picture in the Academy, or even in Suffolk Street or Pall Mall; but the pictorial advertisement of it displayed at all the stations in the summer months was such as, once having seen, no eye could

easily forget. The scene was at once so brilliant, picturesque, and fashionable.

On a beautiful heath that contrasted strongly with the broad bright border of garden flowers that Art had placed on it, stood the 'Point Hotel, Salton,' a palatial edifice, 'replete,' said the letter-press beneath the picture, 'with every modern convenience, and supplied with every luxury of the season.' One carriage and four, it was true, was departing from its principal entrance, but then two were driving up to it full of expectant guests; those who were already its happy tenants were taking equestrian exercise upon the spacious parade in front of it; or playing croquet on its 'unrivalled' lawn; or endeavouring (in vain) to exhaust the resources of the establishment in the articles of open flys, garden seats, or arbours 'so happily situated as to views both on land and sea.' A considerable portion of the British Navy was stationed immediately opposite this abode of bliss, and the rest of it appeared to be coming up full sail to join it. The extreme proximity of the

numerous bathing machines (each with 'Point Hotel' upon them) to these vessels of war, was, in fact (to the modest mind), the only drawback to the attractions of this marine abode, and even that might have been a mere misrepresentation of perspective. The whole picture reminded you of one of Claude's—at least in one respect, that every object that a landscape could suggest was to be found in it, besides those (such as the bathing machines and croquet ground) which had turned up since the elder master's time. Moreover, the tints in which the landscape was portrayed were of the most intense description; never were skies more blue, never was sea more green—indeed I may say *so* green—as they were depicted at Salton Point. The British passenger is not, as a rule, impulsive (unless you abstract his umbrella), or else the attractions of scenery and climate as represented in this delightful picture were such as to have infallibly diverted him from going anywhere else, and take him, out of hand, from the main line on to the branch to Saltonborough, whence a

coach, with four flying steeds (said a supplementary advertisement) would convey him to the Point Hotel.

For George Gresham, journeying slowly by breaks and branches, as is the way with those who patronise cross lines, this picture, which began to meet his eye, late in the afternoon, at every station, had, of course, a special attraction. It was some sort of satisfaction to him, on his melancholy errand, to be thus assured that the locality at least to which he was bound was of a cheerful kind. It was nothing to him, of course, that 'the internal arrangements of the hotel were conducted in the Continental fashion;' or that 'the *table d'hôte* was second to none;' but these facts seemed somehow to relieve the gloom that in his imagination enveloped the roof beneath which his uncle had come to his end.

Gresham's first disenchantment took place at Saltonborough, where, instead of the Flying Coach, he found only a melancholy one-horse omnibus starting for 'The Point,' and on which,

save for a humpbacked driver with a keen hatchet face, he was the only passenger. Lightly laden as it was, and level as was the lonely road on which it travelled, its progress was very slow. On both sides of it extended a treeless waste, on one hand consisting of rank meadow land; on the other of marsh, which presently became a morass, and eventually an arm of the sea—apparently suffering from paralysis. It had hardly any tidal movement, and the very gulls that flew lazily across it seemed to partake of its stagnation. There were no vessels, save one huge collier lying on her side in the mud, like a sea monster in a fit; but several masts, or what looked like masts, stood up forlornly in the ooze and slime, as though, like human ne'er-do-wells, the ships to which they had once belonged had gradually 'gone under.'

After a few miles, the road itself, to avoid sharing a similar fate, proceeded along a causeway; but, causeway or road, there was nothing on it except the one-horse omnibus, which

appeared to be journeying with the last man to the end of the world.

'There don't seem many people about,' observed Gresham to the driver, after a long silence; 'I suppose the season has hardly begun yet.'

'The season?' answered the other, moodily, and not even taking the trouble to turn his head to his companion; 'oh! yes, the season's begun fast enough; we've nothing to complain of about *that*.'

'I mean the visitors at the hotel,' continued Gresham; 'they don't appear to have come down yet.'

'Yes, they have; more on 'em than usual,' was the unexpected reply. 'Last week we had twice as many as this time last year; now we've got our usual quantity.'

'They don't seem to ride or drive much, at all events,' remarked Gresham.

'Small blame to 'em,' answered the driver, crustily. 'Half on 'em's dead.'

'Half of them *dead?*' repeated Gresham, in

accents of horror. 'There must have been an epidemic, then—what on earth was it?'

'*I* dunno: you must ask the doctor, Mr. Howard. Epidemic or not, we can't afford to have many sick at the Point, or we should soon have to shut up shop.'

'But I thought it was so healthy,' argued Gresham; 'the advertisement on the railway——'

Here the driver burst out into such a laugh that an old crow, the only living denizen of the landscape besides themselves, rose with a frightened 'caw, caw,' from the ditch beside them, and sailed away into the gathering mist; for the dews were already falling.

'Oh! yes, the Point is healthy enough,' observed the man, after he had thus relieved his feelings; 'but if you think it like that pictur at the station: oh lor'! However, I belongs to the establishment; and you had better judge for yourself.'

And again he relapsed into taciturnity.

This idea of an epidemic, however, without

at all alarming Gresham on his own account, had reawakened his suspicions of Mr. Walcot's morality. Was it possible that, knowing of this visitation, he had wilfully brought Sir Robert here in his critical state, to fall a victim to the contagion?

'Do you really mean to say, my good man, that one half of the visitors at the Point Hotel this spring have died there?'

'Yes, I do,' was the dogged reply. 'There was two on 'em in all, and now there's only one on 'em.'

Then Gresham perceived that circumstances or nature had made his companion a cynic, and dowered him with the grim humour which is the ordinary mitigation of that calamity.

'I am Sir Robert Arden's nephew; it is to *his* death, as I suppose, that you have so unfeelingly referred?'

'I didn't mean no unfeelingness,' muttered the man, in ungracious apology; 'though, of course, it don't put inn folks in any particular good temper when a party only takes his rooms

to die in 'em; and I would not 'a said a word if I had known you was kith or kin to him. You are like the poor old gentleman, too, now I come to look at you. He was but skin and bone when they landed him, and as yeller as any guinea.'

'Then he was very ill from the first?' sighed Gresham, whom sympathy on Sir Robert's account had rendered insensible to the compliment thus paid to himself.

'I believe you; as ill as ill could be. He only used the sittin' room (it was No. 1 on the first floor) for a day or two, and then took to his bed reglar. Now the other one—may be you are *his* nephew by the mother's side?'

'No, no: I am not; but I know the—gentleman you speak of—well enough; what were you going to say about him?'

'Well, I was going to say,' said the hunchback, with a caution aroused no doubt by the eagerness of his companion's tone, 'that the other one, *he* is alive enough; here to-day and in London to-morrow, and all over the place.'

'In London to-morrow?' answered Gresham. 'Is he going to London?'

'Not as I knows on, though it's like enough. It's a way we have of speaking; here to-day and gone to-morrow—which is what happened to your uncle the Baronet. Ah! that was hard; to have a Baronet in our "arrivals" for a week or less, and then to lose him altogether.'

'But when did Mr. Walcot go to London?'

'Well, the day after Sir Robert took and died. He had done all he could for him—that everybody says—when his friend was alive, and never left his side. But when he was dead, I suppose he thought he might be his own master (as he is everybody else's; I never knew so masterful a gentleman) for four-and-twenty hours.'

'I see,' replied Gresham, thoughtfully. He was wondering whether that time could possibly have been consumed by Mr. Ferdinand Walcot in going to Halcombe instead of London. It was on the night of the 21st that Mayne and

he had had their burglar-chase; and the date tallied with this.

'I don't think you'll find Mr. Walcot at the Point just now,' continued the driver. 'He has been waiting at home for some one—you, as it turns out—every day except that next one after his friend died, and now it seems he has given you up. At all events, he was just going out for a sail when I started for the station; and I notice that the wind has changed, which will keep him out longer than he bargained for.'

There were two sources of comfort for Gresham in this piece of intelligence: in the first place, the carelessness of Walcot in leaving the coast clear for him to make all inquiries at the hotel, in his absence, seemed to prove him innocent of foul play as respected his late companion; secondly, it was a great relief to the young fellow to feel that he might take his last farewell of Sir Robert without this man's hypocritical presence.

As the last of the afternoon was fading into

evening the omnibus deposited Gresham at the door of the Point Hotel. This building, so palatial in its proportions upon canvas—or rather on the advertisement board—was in fact a foursquare edifice of moderate size, without verandah, balcony, or porch, to relieve its excessive hideousness. It was newly built, yet already showing traces of decay. The brilliant *parterre* of flowers, which should have separated it from the blooming heath, existed perhaps in pots in the autumn months; but at all events it was absent now; while the 'unrivalled croquet ground' was represented by a patch of mangy grass on one side of the mansion, with three rusty hoops upon it, and a broken mallet. The 'magnificent parade' on which the carriages and four had been represented, with equestrians of both sexes caracolling with such a sense of freedom, was there—so far as space was concerned; only instead of gravel it was sand. Indeed there was rather too much of space about the Point Hotel. Before it was the sea; on the right hand was the heath, on the left

hand was the heath, and behind it was the heath. Not a tree was there to be seen anywhere; but only the heath and the horizon. That the hotel itself had been made the central object in the picture was not to be wondered at; for except a half-finished row of unoccupied lodging-houses there was no other building visible. A more depressing scene at the close of day, thought Gresham, could hardly be imagined; and in this house lay the corpse of his only relative, and to whom he was indebted for all he possessed on earth!

At the door stood the landlord, a pleasant-featured, bright-eyed man, whose foreign appearance perhaps suggested to the composer of the advertisement that phrase about the establishment being conducted 'on the Continental system.' He had a napkin in his hand (being his own waiter), which he waved slowly before him, like a saluting flag, and he smiled on the new arrival as it is popularly believed only a French innkeeper can smile. And yet his name was Jenkins, and he was English.

'Welcome, sir,' he said; 'you have had a fine day for your journey. A private sitting-room, I conclude?'

'My name is Gresham; I am the nephew of the late Sir Robert Arden.'

'A thousand pardons.' The smile flew from Mr. Jenkins's face, and he threw up his hands so tragically that it almost seemed he was about to apply his napkin to his eyes. 'We have been expecting you these many days—ever since, in fact—— Dear me, what a melancholy event!'

'Can I see—the—the——' Gresham hesitated. There is always a difficulty to the sensitive mind in speaking of the newly dead.

'The late Sir Robert Arden, Bart., lies, sir, in Number Four. My wife will usher you there if you wish it, but Mr. Howard begged particularly to have a few words with you first. He is now in your sitting-room. Mr. Walcot begged that he might be at hand in case of your arrival during his own absence. Selina!'

A very stout, but by no means vulgar-look-

ing woman—she looked like the housekeeper in a family of distinction, and fully ten years her husband's senior—here made her appearance.

'If you will kindly walk this way, sir,' said she, in a hushed voice.

She leads the way upstairs to a sitting-room on the first floor, where a young man of Gresham's age is sitting by the fire (for it is cold at the 'Point' still) reading a book in the French tongue—doubtless a scientific work on surgery. With a natural modesty he crams this into the pocket of his shooting jacket as the visitor is announced, then comes forward with a grave smile of greeting. 'So glad to see you, Gresham, though, alas! on a most melancholy occasion. We have been expecting you these three days.'

'I only got Mr. Walcot's letter yesterday morning,' returned Gresham; 'there must be some wretched mistake about it.'

'Mr. Walcot certainly wrote to you on the 21st,' answered the other, 'for I saw

him direct the envelope. I am sorry for the mischance—for a certain reason.'

'What is that?'

'No matter, my dear fellow, that will keep. How well you are looking! You are not changed in anything since we parted at college, while I—I suppose it is being anchored so near the shore here in all sorts of weather—I have become a wreck this long time.'

If this had really been the case salvage was certainly due to somebody, for Mr. Howard still presented a very seaworthy and even taut appearance. For a surgeon in so out-of-the-way a spot he was very smartly dressed, and had a certain air of fashionable languor, though far removed from *ennui.* The whiskers that sentinelled his handsome face were exceptionally well looked after, and he had an admiring way of regarding his boots which revealed the dandy.

'I was right,' thought Gresham, noticing this, 'about my friend here, so far as honesty is concerned; but it remains to be seen whether

that scoundrel has not made a fool or a tool of him.'

'My dear Howard,' said he aloud, 'I present myself to you as an old friend in sad trouble, who may need your help; at all events I must ask of you to behave towards me with perfect frankness.'

'You mean as regards what has happened here, and especially with respect to Mr. Walcot's conduct,' was the unexpected reply. 'Most certainly I will do so, and the more willingly since I have been requested by that gentleman himself to conceal nothing.'

'Why should he suspect you of concealing anything?' put in Gresham, quickly. 'Why should he have hinted at concealment at all?'

'Because he foresaw what would happen,' answered the young surgeon, with a smile. 'He knew you would want to pump me because you mistrust him. "Your friend Gresham thinks I am a rogue," said he, "because his interests and mine happen to be somewhat antagonistic, and he honestly thinks it. I

cannot stoop to contest that point, but must leave you to judge for yourself. Only when he comes, for Heaven's sake answer all his questions without reserve, else he will at once believe that I have murdered his poor uncle, and that you have connived at it." I think that "and that you have connived at it," was a capital joke,' observed Mr. Howard, 'though indeed (he added, precipitately) all jokes on such a subject are out of place.'

'Yes, indeed,' said Gresham, gravely. 'Of course, my dear Howard, I have no fear of your having played into this man's hands—which to say only the bare truth are not clean ones; but are you sure—are you quite sure—that you have been so careful of the case that nothing amiss could have happened without your knowing it, that your confidence has not been won, and your watchfulness lulled to rest, by this man's show of affection for your patient?'

'I am quite sure, Gresham,' answered the young man, confidently. 'Everything has followed the course of nature—which is un-

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happily not always so satisfactory as some people would have us believe. Mr. Walcot was very kind and attentive to your uncle, but not demonstratively so.'

'Indeed? And did not Sir Robert on his part appear "eaten up" with him, as poor Lady Arden used to call it?'

'Well, no; certainly not that. He seemed to be quite conscious of his care and kindness—which were unintermittent—but no more.'

'Then he must have found him out,' exclaimed Gresham, naïvely. 'That must have been terrible, to have one's pillow smoothed by a hand we know to be false.'

The surgeon answered nothing to this; but regarded his companion very curiously, as though he had been some physiological phenomenon.

'Ah, you don't know this gentleman as I know him,' continued the other, pacing the room with hasty steps; 'he has played the very devil.'

'That is just what my people say of me,' observed Mr. Howard, quietly, 'just because I am not a success in life, as you may guess by seeing me down here. But I am not so very bad, I do assure you.'

'No; but then you have only injured your own prospects, not deliberately attempted to destroy those of others. You have not estranged man from wife, and kith from kin, for your own vile ends. By the bye,' here his voice softened, 'did my uncle ever speak of me?'

'To my knowledge, never.'

Gresham bit his lip: 'Nor of his wife?'

'Yes, he used to talk to himself about her, but that was when his mind wandered, and from what I gathered the lady was dead.'

Gresham threw up his hands. 'Poor Lady Arden!' he said. Then after a long pause he added softly, 'I think I will see him before this man returns.'

'If you wish it, certainly,' said the surgeon, rising, and lighting a bedroom candle.

'I don't *wish* it: I abhor it,' answered

Gresham, with a half shudder; 'but I think it is my duty.'

'Very good; just let me pour you out a glass of wine. As a medical man I prescribe that.'

Gresham shook his head, and motioned him impatiently to lead the way.

'You will do as you please, of course, my dear fellow, but I should say, "sherry." You will see a great change—a *very* great change. We expected you, you know, much earlier.'

Gresham shivered, and with a gesture, half of impatience, half of disgust, followed the doctor out of the room.

In a minute or two they returned, and this time Gresham drained the glass which he had refused before. He was very pale, and his hand trembled as it carried the wine to his lips.

'I guessed how it would be,' observed Howard, coolly; 'it is often so with those who look on death for the first time. I felt something like it myself at my first *post-mortem*.

This was a particularly bad case, for your poor uncle suffered from a complication of maladies, though the immediate cause of his decease was, as Walcot told you, fatty—— Hullo, here *is* Mr. Walcot.'

CHAPTER IV.

AT THE INN.

NEITHER of the young men had heard Mr. Walcot's step in the passage, or his hand on the door, yet there he stood in the middle of the room, with his keen face fixed on Gresham. He was dressed in rough sailor garb, having just landed from the sailing boat, and it contrasted strangely with the delicacy, nay, almost the effeminacy, of his features. His cheeks, for all the buffeting of the wind, showed no trace of colour; and the tone of his first words, 'So you have come at last, Mr. Gresham,' although somewhat reproachful, was as gentle as a woman's.

'I started as soon as I got your note, which was this morning,' answered Gresham, coldly,

and without taking the least notice of the other's outstretched hand. 'Its delay is unaccountable to us.'

'Not more so than it is to me,' was the calm reply. 'I think you saw me write it and post it also, Mr. Howard.'

'Yes, by Jove, and so I did,' said the surgeon, quickly. 'I had forgotten about the posting; but now I remember you dropped it in the box in my presence, and remarked on the time it would take to reach Halcombe.'

'The envelope was dated Salton, 24th,' observed Gresham, coldly. 'As it happens, I brought it with me, and here it is.'

'That is curious, indeed,' said Walcot, examining it. 'The only explanation possible is that it must have stuck in the box; these country postmasters are so careless. However, unhappily, haste could not have mended matters.'

Gresham turned upon his heel, and poked the fire. It made him mad to hear this man discourse so oilily, and the more so because the

oil allowed no chance of friction; if he would only say something he could have 'taken hold of,' that would have given him the opportunity to exhibit the contempt that consumed him!

While his back was turned, Walcot cast a glance of interrogation at the surgeon, who replied to it with a significant nod. Then he went on in still lower and more gentle tones. 'Have you taken your friend, Mr. Howard, to pay his last sad visit to——'

'Yes, yes, I have,' said Howard, hastily; 'it is not necessary to refer to that.'

'Just so; I have ventured in your absence, Mr. Gresham, to take all necessary steps with regard to our proposed sad journey to-morrow —if to-morrow suits you.'

'Of course it does,' answered Gresham, with irritation; 'the sooner we get away from this hateful place the better. Why did you ever bring him to it?'

'Because otherwise he would have died on board the "Méduse," answered Walcot, calmly.

'My uncle was well enough when he left Halcombe.'

Mr. Walcot smiled a pitying smile, and looked at Mr. Howard as though he would say, 'Did I not tell you so?'

'I am bound to say, Gresham,' said the surgeon, in answer to his silent appeal, 'that your uncle must have been very far from well at the date you speak of. He must have had in fact the seeds of death in him for many months.'

Here the landlord came in to lay the cloth for dinner.

'It is a fine night after all, gentlemen,' he said, in chirpy tones; 'and there will be a lovely moon. Salton by moonlight is much admired, is it not, Mr. Howard?'

'It looks better than by daylight,' answered that gentleman, unsympathetically; 'but best of all, to my thinking, in a fog.'

'Dear me,' said the landlord, 'now that's curious. Though indeed I have known some who say, "Give them a downright wet day."

We have a piano in the house, you must know, sir,' turning to Gresham, 'and Mrs. Jenkins has, it is thought, a pretty touch; and there is my museum. A bat that I caught with my own hands on the terrace; a lamb with two heads born in the immediate neighbourhood; some beautiful specimens of dried frogs from Salton marsh. All the fauna of the locality in short, as Mr. Howard is so good as to call them—— Here is the wine-*carte*, gentlemen. I would venture to recommend our 'ock.'

'If you mean your beef, Mr. Jenkins, there is nothing to be said against it,' said Howard, smiling; 'but it is no use your looking at me for a recommendation of white vinegar. It is against my professional principles, unless I have a commission.'

'Mr. Howard will always have his joke,' explained the landlord.

'Bring some champagne,' said Walcot, curtly; 'and remember that we wish to see the cork.'

'You'll be sure to *taste* it, at all events,'

observed Howard; he was doing his best to dissolve the gloom of the little party, but by no means with the desired effect. He was the only one of the three who did justice to the entertainment, which was of the usual British-inn description; soles, a leg of lamb, and apple tart.

Directly it was concluded, Gresham rose with a sigh and left the room.

Walcot looked up with the same look of inquiry as he had worn before.

'Do not fear,' said Howard, assuringly. 'He has had quite enough of *that*, poor fellow. You were quite right to put me on my guard. He turned as white as a woman when she sees blood.'

'Poor fellow!' said Walcot, pityingly. 'You must never mention to him what I told you. It would wound his *amour propre*; and, besides, he would resent above all things my appearing to take any interest in him. His prejudices are beyond belief.'

'That is only to be expected,' said Howard,

coolly helping himself to champagne (they had had no other wine); 'given a super-sensitive nature, and all these things follow in their proper places. It is a pity in Gresham's case, for he is an excellent fellow. At college—where I was, however, two years his senior—he was a general favourite, and deservedly so.'

'No doubt,' said Walcot, coldly. 'His uncle, however, had a great dislike to him.'

'Ah! *his* nature, perhaps, was also super-sensitive?'

'Very much so,' said Mr. Walcot.

In the meantime the subject of this talk had gone out upon the heath with his cigar. The presence of Walcot was intolerable to him, but so soon as he had left it he ceased to think of the man. He paced the silent desolate heath, which, under the moon's radiance, and fringed by the silver of the wave, was not without its grace, and even grandeur, with unwonted thoughts of death; it was rare for him (as for most of us) to dwell on such a topic; but the place, and circumstance, and time, all tended to

draw his mind in that direction. He did not think of the Hereafter, nor even of death in its general or philosophical aspects: that is not the manner of such men; but only of the dead man lying near him. What a sad end it was, and how wholly unexpected, that one of such a gentle nature, made to be loved by his fellow-creatures, and who had been loved by some of the best of them, should have perished *here* among strangers save for one familiar, but false, friend! All the dead man's past kindnesses, from the 'tips' he had given him as a schoolboy, to the hopes which he had once expressed in him—it had been on his going to Germany after the Cambridge *fiasco*—as the last of all his kin—rose up before Gresham one by one, and made appeal, as it were, for his uncle's memory against harsh judgment. Sir Robert might have shaken the very dust from his feet on leaving Halcombe; he might have elected—nay it was too likely that he did so—to become henceforth a stranger to his own belongings, for the sake of this worthless

scoundrel who had so fooled him, and it might be that he had made such dispositions in his will that all who were really worthy of his remembrance, or had a natural claim to it, were left out in the cold, to the advantage of this scheming villain. If that should be the case—and notwithstanding that if it were so, Gresham's once smiling future would be dark and cheerless indeed—the young fellow now made up his mind that no feeling of bitterness should take root within him. He would think of Sir Robert as he had been in the good old time, and he would set down any harshness or injustice, not to his hand at all, but to the alien fingers that had guided it.

To have arrived at this conclusion may seem to some excellent people to have been no great virtue after all; they may argue that, since Sir Robert might have done as he liked with his own, the young man had no cause to feel aggrieved. This, however, was not quite the case. Gresham had been brought up in habits of luxury and idleness in view of his

great expectations, and should these have been withdrawn from him—and he had a very strong presentiment that they had been so—he had certainly good reason to complain. Moreover, to the eye of youth its grievances seem large, while what of good befalls it—and especially if it is past good—is taken as a matter of course. Whatever misfortune was hanging over Gresham's head, it must also be remembered, threatened that of his Elise also in her relation to him. So that upon the whole the young man's resolution was commendable. The effect of it was to send him back to the hotel with a less heavy heart than he had left it, but with by no means a more mollified mind as respected Mr. Ferdinand Walcot: indeed, in acquitting his uncle, his indignation rose higher than ever against this man, who had done his best—though happily in vain—to make him not only a pauper, but an ingrate.

In the doorway of the hotel stood a man with a cigar, and Gresham took another turn on 'the Parade' for fear it should be his enemy.

Presently the man came out, and he saw it was a stranger, in a black suit: 'it is one of the people that are engaged for that horrible journey to-morrow,' he said to himself, not without a shudder. Then, ashamed of his weakness, he walked up to him. A big, burly man, with bushy whiskers, and a red face, which the light from his cigar made redder.

'A fine night.'

'Yes, sir, very fine,' answered the other; 'it's a keen air though from the sea. What do you say to a glass of "hot with"?'

In a general way Gresham would have certainly said 'No,' and very decidedly. He didn't like 'liberties' in the lower classes; but at that moment he heard Walcot's voice at the open window above them, speaking no doubt to Howard, and even the society of an undertaker's man was preferable to his.

'I don't mind if I do,' he said; and the other led the way into the coffee-room. It was a large apartment very barely furnished; and on its wall, for single ornament, bore an

immense plan of Salton Point, divided into building plots, and with a number of striking edifices upon it including a club-house, a church, and a skating rink.

'It may be a lively place when all that happens,' said the stranger, pointing to this work of the imagination, 'but at present it's dull; deuced dull.'

The landlord appeared and supplied them with what was wanted, without a glance of recognition at Gresham. It was a pleasing fiction of his that the coffee-room waiter was quite another person from the other waiters, who again were wholly disconnected, except in their business relations, from the landlord—albeit they were all one and himself.

'As if it wasn't dull enough already,' pursued the stranger, when they were left alone, 'there has been a death here.'

'I know it,' answered Gresham, curtly.

'Have you seen him?'

'Seen whom?' inquired the young man, in a tone of ill-suppressed disgust.

'The dead man. *Your* uncle?'

'Why, bless my soul, it's you, Bevill!' exclaimed Gresham, eagerly.

He was surprised, of course, but very well pleased to find himself in the companionship of a friend—or one who, under the circumstances, was no bad substitute for such. 'Why, I, thought you were an undertaker's man.'

'No; I am in the commercial line, just now. It is not, however, a good place for business; so I have spent my leisure since yesterday in looking about me. It's a queer place to bring a friend to die in.'

'Yes, indeed. Do you really suspect anything?'

'You mean with regard to "my gentleman"? Well, of course, one suspects; but there is nothing to go upon, so far as I can find out. Sir Robert is dead, that's certain. You say you saw him——?'

'Yes. I went into the room——'

'Ah, well, he was there; that is the point.

The doctor, too, has not been got at; you feel pretty sure of that?'

'I feel *certain*,' answered Gresham; 'he has been deceived, however, by Walcot; takes him for an honest man, and thinks I am unjustly prejudiced against him——'

'Of course,' interrupted Mr. Bevill.

'But there has been no foul play as regards my uncle's death.'

Mr. Bevill nodded adhesion.

'There is *something* queer nevertheless, he said. 'My gentleman gave out that he went to London on Tuesday; it seems, however, he went to Halcombe.'

'Ah! I felt sure I recognised him that night. Mayne has come over to my opinion, then.'

'Well, *I* have, at all events, sir,' returned the detective, drily. 'My gentleman bought his ticket for London; but at Nottly Junction he took the down train. That was stupid in a man like him. The ticket clerk at Nottly was naturally surprised at the waste of fare; and it gave him something to talk about.'

'But I don't see, after all, how this affects Walcot.'

'Nor I, directly, sir. But it shows duplicity; and duplicity,' here the moralist stroked one of his false whiskers, 'always shows that there is mischief somewhere. I have no more notion than Mr. Howard up yonder what my gentleman has been up to; but that he has been up to *some* thing—queer, and not upon the square— I'm *certain*. His story was quite true about your uncle's illness necessitating their being put ashore here by the "Méduse"—that was confirmed by one who sent me here; it is somewhere farther back that we must look for the kink in it; but kink there *is*.'

'That knowledge will be but cold comfort to those he has robbed, Mr. Bevill,' remarked Gresham.

'Quite true, sir; *quite* true. It will not be so solacing, nor yet so warm, as this here whisky punch; but still it will be something to come and go upon. Now Mr. Mayne, *he's* not unreasonable; so long as he cries quits with

my gentleman sooner or later, he says he shall be satisfied; and quits he shall cry. We can't raise the dead, sir—no; but we may so contrive it that the living shall, at last, have their deserts.'

'I am glad you are so hopeful, Mr. Bevill.'

'Hopeful ain't the word, sir; it is unequal to the situation. The right word is "certain." I am certain sure.'

CHAPTER V.

THE WILL.

THE day looked forward to with such abhorrence by George Gresham has come to an end at last, and others almost as sad have succeeded it. The body of Sir Robert Arden has been brought to Halcombe, and laid in the family vault under the church upon the hill. His widow, though bowed down by trouble upon trouble, shows a braver front than had been expected of her, thanks to the presence of Ferdinand Walcot. If he came hoping to see her in humiliation, or moved by passionate discontent, he was disappointed, though to say truth there is as little sign about him of triumph as of self-vindication. His voice is softer than ever, his manners have less of the master about

them than of old; but this may be his tribute to the occasion. If there is any effort in his behaviour, it is an effort to be his old self, unchanged by the new prosperity which all suspect, and he must surely know, awaits him. But to Lady Arden the spectacle of this man in the house he has made desolate is as the poison to the Pontian king; it does her more good than harm. It prevents her from giving way to her calamities. To a certain extent, and while she endures his hateful presence, her anger has cast out her grief. In her eyes he is not only the murderer of her husband, but the wretch who destroyed his love for her. Like Gresham, she feels no indignation against the dead, but nourishes a fury which is almost sublime in its intensity against him who perverted a noble nature to his own foul uses. She is powerless to avenge herself, but she does what she can to show her hate.

For example, she caused Frederic Mayne to be telegraphed for to attend Sir Robert's funeral, which, she knew, would be wormwood

to her enemy. It was as much as to say, 'I ask to my late husband's roof, and to bear his pall, the man against whom you turned his heart by fraud,' which she took for granted without knowing how he had turned it. Mayne came, of course; and at the inn at Mirton arrived on the same day two gentlemen with rods and lines and creels, ostensibly to fish the moorland streams—one of them, Mr. Sturt, a lawyer, a stranger to those parts; the other, Mr. Bevill—and with these, Mr. Mayne held daily communication. Within twenty-four hours Walcot was aware of their arrival, and of their object, of which he spoke quite openly to the family lawyer, Mr. Hayling of Archester.

'Never,' he complained with bitterness, 'was a man placed in a more unpleasant position than I am, nor more unjustly. I am suspected by Lady Arden herself of—I know not what indeed—but at the least of having obtained undue influence over her late husband. She invites to his roof a man who he himself compelled to quit it for gross misconduct, simply

because the information on which he did so, she knows, was furnished by myself. And then she connives at spies being located in the neighbourhood. I think, sir, I am very hardly used.'

Mr. Hayling, a country lawyer of the old school, with three yards of white cravat, bowed stiffly; it was not a sympathising bow; it seemed at the most to say, 'No doubt yours is an unpleasant position.'

'However, sir,' continued Mr. Walcot, 'I have the satisfaction of feeling I have done my duty by my dead friend and brother-in-law, and have nothing to reproach myself with; that is some compensation.'

'And there are others,' observed the lawyer, drily.

This was base ingratitude, for in that very will to which Mr. Hayling thus referred—and which was now in his own keeping—there was a bequest of one hundred pounds to him, which was solely owing to Mr. Walcot's suggestion.

It was clear that the lawyer could not be

counted upon as an ally; while all the rest were in open enmity with him. Nothing but the mere decencies of life, in fact, prevented Mr. Ferdinand Walcot from being addressed as Scoundrel, Liar, Thief, by every member of the family, or their friends, which for a person of 'acute sensibility of mind,' as Mr. Walcot had often described himself to be, was certainly deplorable.

I have noticed that something very similar occasionally occurs to some very clever fellows, whom all the world acknowledge to have achieved a great success in life; and it seems to me to detract both from the cleverness and the success. Still, in both cases, the spoils remain with the conqueror; and in the one under consideration these were very large.

When the will was read in the great dining-room of Halcombe, a scene took place which made some congratulate themselves that the young ladies of the household had thought proper to absent themselves from that transaction.

There were present, the widow, who sat in the bay window and in the very chair which had been Sir Robert's favourite seat, and fronting the same home-view that had so often pleased his eye; close to her stood his next-of-kin George Gresham, with his hand resting on the back of her chair—they had been fast friends when their interests had been apparently antagonistic, and now that they were both about to suffer material loss (as they felt certain) they were no less drawn together; Frederic Mayne stood by the chimney-piece with his elbow on it, and his gaze fixed sternly, and it must be owned somewhat offensively, upon Mr. Walcot, who now and again repaid him with a glance of contempt, but for the most part remained with folded arms throughout the proceedings, and with eyes bent upon the floor.

Between these two men the Curate had placed himself, doubtless by accident, though it seemed no inappropriate position for one whose calling was that of peacemaker; his countenance alone bore no trace of resentment, but only

wore the gloom befitting one who has lost a dear and kindly friend.

Even in the lawyer's case, a certain sternness mingled with his usual gravity of demeanour, which bespoke his distaste for the task before him.

'One moment, Mr. Hayling,' interposed Gresham, ere he began to read; 'may I ask how that document came into your hands?'

'Most certainly you may, Mr. Gresham; it was placed there by Mr. Ferdinand Walcot here present.'

'And from whom did he receive it?'

'I received it from the late Sir Robert Arden during his last illness,' observed Walcot, perceiving that the lawyer looked towards him for a reply.

'No,' said Lady Arden in a sharp, firm voice. 'It was placed, as were all my husband's private papers, in the secret cupboard in the window-seat of his dressing-room.'

'His other papers may have been placed there, Lady Arden,' answered Walcot gently;

'but you are mistaken as to this one, I do assure you.'

'She is *not* mistaken!' exclaimed Gresham. 'It is you who have lied. With my own eyes I saw you take it out of the window-seat on the 22nd of last month, just ten days ago, at midnight.'

For an instant Walcot's presence of mind deserted him; the colour which Lady Arden's speech had called into his cheek suddenly fled, leaving them of a vivid paleness.

'I was at Salton Point—no, in London—on the date you mentioned,' exclaimed he, defiantly.

'You were not,' replied Gresham, curtly; 'you came here to get possession of that will—with what object I know not, except that, judging others by yourself, you may have thought we should destroy it. You came, like a thief in the night; but I saw you, from the lawn, abstract it from its hiding-place.'

'I saw him also,' observed Mayne. 'At the time I did not recognise the thief. Now I

have no doubt of his identity: one has only to look at him as he stands there.'

Certainly Mr. Ferdinand Walcot did not at that particular moment appear to the best advantage. His eyes refused to meet those of his accusers, and his teeth fastened on his under lip till the blood came; still it was with the old masterful air and tone that he turned to the lawyer at his side: 'When you have had enough of these falsehoods, Mr. Hayling—the obvious offspring of petty malice and baffled hopes—I beg you to proceed with the matter in hand, as I have no time to spare.' And he made a show of looking at his watch.

As Gresham nodded acquiescence in reply to the lawyer's inquiring look, the latter proceeded with the reading of the will. Its provisions were, in the main, what had been looked for. Ferdinand Walcot was the heir, not only to the personalty—the money in the funds and elsewhere, all of which was left to him—but to most of the landed estate. To Lady Arden was left (she had, of course, her jointure,

which was considerable) the tenancy of the Hall for life—and that was all. What was still more singular was that, although 3,000*l.* apiece were bequeathed to Millicent, Frank, and the Great Baba, Evelyn (who had once been the prime favourite of her step-father) had only a thousand pounds. To George Gresham, the Baronet's next of kin and only relative, was left but 5,000*l.*; and even that under peculiar and humiliating restrictions. He was to have nothing, and his bequest was to revert to the residuary legatee (Mr. Walcot), unless for the next two years after Sir Robert's death, the young man should be up and dressed by seven o'clock in the winter and six in summer, save in case of illness; in which event he was to make up for the lost time after the two years were over. Moreover, there were some stern words addressed to him about the sin of deception, which fell upon Gresham's ear with the greater bitterness, since he perceived Mr. Walcot's evident enjoyment of them.

What seemed to those present even more

offensive than the details of this document was the fact that Ferdinand Walcot was made its administrator, the sole trustee—a circumstance which even cautious Mr. Hayling afterwards described as 'very unusual.' But about the genuineness and legality of the will itself there was no shadow of doubt.

The whole family were more or less outlawed, and Mr. Ferdinand Walcot was appointed inheritor of their rights. When this document, which was a very lengthy one, and included a number of small bequests to the domestics, had been read aloud, down to the very names of the witnesses—two servants then in the house—there ensued a painful silence, which Lady Arden was the first to break.

'Do I understand, Mr. Hayling,' said she, in a firm, clear voice, 'that this house and all that it contains are for my lifetime my own—that I am mistress here, in short, as of old?'

'Certainly, my dear madam,' answered the lawyer, confidently; 'as much as you ever were, and more so.'

'Then I wish that man,'—she pointed with a trembling finger to the now lord of so many thousands—'to leave this roof.' The poor lady also made some other observations not so dignified in style—for under pressure of a vital wrong it is not every woman who preserves repose of manner—to all which Mr. Walcot only replied by a pitying smile.'

At last Gresham rose from his chair, and in a voice of suppressed passion exclaimed, 'Go, sir.'

Mr. Walcot shrugged his shoulders with more than French significance: this gesture seemed to say, 'Well, perhaps you are right; my absence is doubtless the only thing that will stop this good woman's tongue.'

He drew on his gloves, took up his hat, and, with a grave bow to the lawyer, left the room.

CHAPTER VI.

A LAST APPEAL.

I AM afraid that if Lady Arden had been consulted on the matter, no equipage from the Halcombe stables would have been placed at the disposal of Mr. Ferdinand Walcot, when that gentleman took his departure from the Hall; but as it happened, he ran no risk of a refusal of that courtesy, but, calling at the little inn in person, ordered a cart for the conveyance of his luggage, and took his own way to Mirton on foot.

Despite the indisputable success that had at last crowned his efforts, there was no sign of triumph in his mien; he walked up the street with head erect indeed, but no higher than he usually carried it, and when he turned into the

solitary Wilderness it dropped forward, and he clasped his hands behind him—which was his manner when in deep thought. The recollection of the last occasion on which he had trodden that same path—at full speed and pursued by two amateur detectives—might well have then occurred to him, but he was thinking of no such thing; it was not his habit to dwell upon the past at any time, and just now the future demanded his attention. Most persons would no doubt have concluded that Mr. Ferdinand Walcot, with from forty to fifty thousand pounds in his pocket, or at immediate command, and with a much larger sum in land that could be realised, if necessary, in a few weeks or months, had now—since the blessings of his fellow-creatures were not in his programme—obtained all he wanted; but this was by no means the case.

Man never is but always to be bless'd.

He was thinking how a certain desired object could be most easily obtained, when at

that very turn of the road, where he had once found the means of escape from a very unpleasant position, and ridden away on it, this very object presented itself—in the person of Evelyn Nicoll.

A pious person would have exclaimed, 'This is providential,' but what Mr. Walcot observed to himself was, 'This is luck, indeed.'

She was coming very slowly homeward, and so wrapped in thought that she did not at first observe him; he had time to notice how pale she looked in her mourning garb, and with what an inelastic step she walked. When she caught sight of him she gave an obvious start —which was, indeed, a species of shudder—then drew herself up, and quickened her speed; not to meet him we may be sure—but to get the meeting over. She would have passed him with a stiff bow, and without a word, if he had not addressed her.

'Miss Evelyn,' he said, in his gentlest tone. 'I wish to speak to you.'

She stopped and scanned him from head

to foot, in a most unpromising fashion. 'Well sir?'

'I have just come from a very sad scene,' he said, 'and which has been made still more distressing to me on your account.'

'Indeed?'

But that one word, and yet she somehow contrived to express in it incredulity and contempt sufficient to fill a volume.

'I see,' he continued, gently, 'that, like the rest, you are prepared to misjudge me; that you behold in me a selfish adventurer who has enriched himself by discreditable means at the expense of others.'

She bowed, haughtily enough, but in unmistakable assent.

'Well, that is not so. I could not help the estrangement that took place between your late step-father and his belongings; it was a misfortune sure to happen, on account of certain circumstances—very peculiar ones (which I will fully explain to you another time), and quite out of my power to prevent. What I wish to

say just now is that it is my pride and happiness to think that if you have suffered loss it is far from being irreparable. It is true your step-father has left you a mere nothing—a miserable thousand pounds—but it remains with you—you have only to say one little word —to become his sole heiress.'

'I do not understand you,' returned Evelyn, coldly; 'if my step-father has left me a thousand pounds, it is only another proof—though I did not need it—of the love he bore me. As to being his heiress, that would be out of the question in any case. Do you suppose that I would rob George Gresham of his rights, even if it lay in my power?'

'George Gresham,' repeated the other, contemptuously, 'has forfeited by his own misconduct what rights he may have ever possessed. He is a man who does not know what is worth having; his behaviour to yourself is a supreme example of it.'

'The question of what is worth having, Mr. Walcot, is a matter of taste,' replied Evelyn,

disdainfully; 'some people think that they obtain it when they have got riches, though in obtaining them they may have earned the contempt of every honest man.'

'You are more than severe, Evelyn, you are unjust,' answered Walcot, gently; 'but you can never make me angry with you. It is strange, and shows the intensity of your prejudice, that though you recognise Sir Robert's right to withhold his benefits from one person (yourself, for instance) you deny it as respects another. Who was so dear to him as I was; who (with one exception) was more near to him, by the ties of marriage, if not of blood? The fact, then, that he has chosen to leave me his whole fortune, instead of a large portion of it, is not so very surprising, and should certainly not evoke the contempt of all honest men upon its recipient. You may say that I schemed for it. If to make one's self useful to another in a thousand ways, to invite and reciprocate his confidence, to sacrifice one's time and pleasure for him, is to scheme—then I have

"schemed." But the word is not applicable to my conduct in any other sense. That I had this golden end in view, while doing my duty to my friend and brother-in-law, may have been the case, just as any other honest worker may look for his reward; nay, to be frank with you, it was so. And yet my object, Evelyn, was not a selfish one. When we last spoke together alone I ventured to predict a time when I should address you under very different circumstances—no longer as a dependent, a suppliant at the feet of Fortune; and the time has come with unlooked-for speed. I am now a man of wealth, which, however, is only valuable to me in that I can offer it to *you*: I do not say to share it; it shall be yours unreservedly upon the day that you become my wife. Do not frown, nor flash your scorn upon me, Evelyn; I tell you that I love you; such love as mine is given but to few, yet, once given, given for ever—a love not lightly won, nor lightly to be rejected.'

'You seem to think so highly of it, Mr.

Walcot,' replied Evelyn, scornfully, 'that the love of others is as nought beside it. Mine, for instance, as I gather, you deem is purchaseable. It was denied to you when you were poor; but you imagine that it has now come within reach of your purse.'

'You wrong me, Evelyn, every way,' he answered, eagerly. 'Your love is beyond price; and yet self-sacrifice—for a man's self is dear to him—and the devotion of a life might win it. The offer of my fortune was not made to tempt you; I only wished to say, "all that is mine is yours. I have not toiled for *it*, but for you only." Do not, however, suppose, dear girl, that I have only material reasons to advance in favour of my suit. I say nothing of myself—though, indeed, with this wealth to back me, I think I have the means within me of acquiring a great position, only to be prized, however, because, you, the sharer of it, will so become it; but if the wishes of the beloved dead have weight with you, I may say that it was Sir

Robert's latest wish, expressed to me upon his death-bed, that——'

He hesitated, and Evelyn, looking fixedly upon his face, inquired, 'Well, what?'

'He said that though he had left his wealth away from some who might have looked for it, he would be well pleased, indeed, if it should return to one of them through me; he said, "Ever since that other wish of mine"—referring, I suppose, to the engagement between Gresham and yourself—"has failed, I have desired that Evelyn Nicoll should be your wife."—Do you hear me, Evelyn?' for the girl, though still regarding him intently, said never a word.

'Yes, I hear you,' she now answered, slowly. 'It would make no difference to the matter in question even if Sir Robert did thus speak, for he could not have been himself—the gentle, kind, just, step-father I knew; in any case, indeed, it would make no difference, because my heart could never be given to such as you, at any one's request, however dear; but, to be frank with you, Ferdinand Walcot, *I do not believe you.*'

'What? Not my word?'

'No, nor your oath; I utterly distrust you, and abhor you.'

'You *do?* And you dare to tell me so—Evelyn Nicoll—to my face?' His brow grew very dark, and from his eyes there shot a gleam of fury terrible in its concentrated malevolence.

'Yes, sir; do not let me have to repeat it in the presence of another.'

She pointed quietly down the road, up which Mr. Dyneley could be seen approaching with quick strides.

Walcot cast a look at him in which rage and calculation were strangely mixed. It seemed to say, 'Is there time, before this man comes up, to drag this woman down to yonder cliff-top, and there end her life and mine together, or is there not time?'

If such were his inquiry, the reply, it seemed, was in the negative; he took off his hat to Evelyn, and with a very creditable imitation of a smile of farewell, turned on his heel and pursued his way.

CHAPTER VII.

MR. STURT'S PRESENTIMENT.

WITHIN an hour or two of the reading of Sir Robert's will at the Hall, Mr. Sturt, in the inn parlour at Mirton, was giving his consideration to its provisions, which had been supplied to him from notes taken by Mayne and Gresham. He was a short 'squat' man, with what would have been unjustly called a moon face, because that of the moon has mountains, and Mr. Sturt's was perfectly flat, save for a little knob of a nose. But for his eyes, which were very bright and keen, so motionless was his stout form, and so squat his attitude, that he might have sat for a Burmese god.

Upon the whole, the items of the will were much as had been expected, and, while they

showed clearly enough under whose dictation the document had been prepared, afforded no grounds for legal dispute. Gresham might say and think (indeed, he did so) that his uncle must have been mad to bestow his estate on such a scoundrel as Ferdinand Walcot, and might impute, with reason, 'undue influence' to that worthy; but such vague charges were, of course, incapable of proof. But while the will held good there were certain points in it which not a little awakened Mr. Sturt's curiosity, and with a lawyer curiosity means suspicion. He was sufficiently acquainted with the circumstances of the family to understand why the legacy of George Gresham had been coupled with that singular restriction as to early rising. It was most likely a whim of the testator, flattered into action by Walcot in order to inflict a personal insult upon his enemy: even the appointment of Walcot, as trustee of that remnant of the estate which was not left to him absolutely, could—'unusual' as it was—be explained on similar grounds. He had probably persuaded

Sir Robert to extend to him, after death, that confidence which he had always evinced in him during life, not so much to clear his own character in the eyes of others as to humiliate those who had shown such disinclination to his sway. But the proportions of the various bequests were not so easily explained. Why should Evelyn have but one thousand pounds while the other children had thrice as much? This disproportion of course, like all the rest, was owing to Walcot's influence; but why had it been exerted to the elder sister's disadvantage?

'Sir Robert had liked her best of all the children,' was Gresham's answer to this inquiry, 'and that was doubtless reason enough for setting Walcot against her.'

Mayne demurred to this; perhaps because he could not imagine how any one could have been preferred to Millicent, and the lawyer himself did not think the explanation sufficient.

'No doubt,' said Gresham, perceiving that the motive was deemed of importance, 'my uncle was annoyed with Evelyn with respect to

a certain matter, in which, however, if any one was to blame, it was not she, but I; and, taking advantage of that prejudice, this brute——'

'Meaning Mr. Walcot?' inquired the lawyer, with raised eyebrows. He had had to do with some base people in his professional career, but never used strong language concerning them. When a man was once in Newgate he expressed his real opinion of him; otherwise he was only 'the defendant,' or 'our opponent.'

'Of course I mean Walcot,' said Gresham, testily. 'If I said "brute," I apologise—to the brutes.'

The lawyer smiled and smoothed his chin.

'If speaking one's mind would do any good, young sir,' he said, 'I would venture to express my own opinion of this gentleman; it is no use barking unless we can bite. It is necessary to get up very early in the morning to tackle Mr. Ferdinand Walcot.

'That is just what Gresham is going to do,'

observed Mayne, laughing. 'Do you really think, however, Mr. Sturt, that even *that*—I mean that any course which we can now take will remedy matters?'

'Not as they stand—no; but I cannot escape from the idea that, though everything our opponent has done seems in accordance with his legal rights, there is still a screw loose. It is a mere presumption—scarcely more, indeed, than a presentiment—yet——' Here he broke off. 'Now these legacies have been left in rather an unusual way. Why should they be paid out of the proceeds of the sale of the estate when there is all this money at the bankers' and elsewhere? One does not wish to be uncharitable; but, under the peculiar circumstances of the case, this seems to me to suggest two things on the part of Mr. Walcot: Haste—no time to be lost, you understand!—and a desire to realise at the earliest possible moment.'

'To fill his pockets and be off before there's a row?' inquired Mayne.

'Well, really, you young men put things in such a strong light; but something of that nature—merely an assumption, as I say—has certainly presented itself to me. Now there may be nothing in it—indeed, I understand Mr. Walcot came this morning on foot from Halcombe, which militates *against* this view——'

'He couldn't help it,' interrupted Gresham; 'no carriage was offered to him, and he was too proud to ask for one.'

'Well; so far that is accounted for, then,' continued Mr. Sturt. 'And when he did get here, he was so anxious to catch the up-express, that he took a postchaise-and-four. Nobody takes a chaise-and-four now-a-days unless one is in a very great hurry.'

'I wish I had known that,' observed Gresham, moodily; 'I'd have put a spoke in one of his wheels, or bribed the postboys. Now he's got clear away; whatever turns up, we shall never catch sight of him, you may depend upon it.'

'If anything is really amiss,' returned the lawyer, slowly—'though, indeed, I can't say how anything *can* be—the will is not proved yet; and however anxious he may be to realise, even the personalty, it can't be done in a day, you know.'

'As to catching sight of our friend,' remarked Mayne, coolly, as he shook the ash from his cigar; 'I think I can promise that we shall never *lose* sight of him. Bevill—though he doesn't look at all like Bevill—has gone up with him in the express.'

'Indeed!' exclaimed the lawyer in admiration.

'Oh, yes, that's my affair; quite independent of the Halcombe interest. I've an old score to settle with the gentleman; a return match—Gresham here knows all about it—has to come off between us.'

'It has been a long time coming off,' observed Gresham, gloomily.

'No doubt; and the date remains unfixed; but, like Mr. Sturt, I have my presentiment.

Our gentleman, as Bevill calls him, has got the start of me, no doubt, and the best of me hitherto; but he has not won the rubber. A treble and four, you know, does not always win.'

'I like that notion of Bevill's sticking to him,' observed the lawyer, thoughtfully. 'It is well to be acquainted with Mr. Ferdinand Walcot's movements, in case he might any day be wanted.'

'"Wanted" is a term used by the police with reference to malefactors,' remarked Gresham, approvingly.

'I meant to imply nothing of the sort,' replied the lawyer with indignation.

'I am sure you did not,' observed Mayne, conciliatingly. 'It was what Paley calls "an undesigned coincidence."'

CHAPTER VIII.

COUPLES.

To ordinary eyes, as we have said, there was nothing more in that parting of Mr. Walcot from Evelyn in the Wilderness than a polite, if somewhat stiff, farewell; yet the Rev. John Dyneley, though he had not been a close spectator thereof, seemed to have seen something strange in the manner of it, for his first words upon reaching the young lady were, 'Has that man been saying anything to annoy you, Miss Evelyn?'

His tone was vehement, nay, fiery; and, if he looked like a son of the Church at all at that particular moment, it was of the Church militant.

'No, no,' returned Evelyn, quickly; 'or I

should rather say he had no intention of annoying me. Pray do nothing rash.'

For the Curate, though she stood looking so sweet and pale beside him, kept his gaze fixed on Mr. Walcot's retreating figure in a very menacing fashion.

'Intention!' he repeated. 'A man like that is well aware of what he says, and should be made to account for it.'

Evelyn laid her hand upon his stalwart arm entreatingly—nay, tenderly, for a woman does not like a man the worse—even though he be a clergyman—for showing fight in her cause.

'I beg of you to restrain yourself, Mr. Dyneley. He is gone away, let us hope for ever, and has left few to regret him. It was a dark day when he first came to dear old Halcombe.'

'Yes, indeed, and he has left evil behind him. His influence over Sir Robert has borne sad fruit. Everything, it seems, has been left to yonder scheming fellow.'

'It would be well if that were all,' said

Evelyn, sighing. 'To do my mother justice, what she will regret far more than any neglect of her in a material way is the thought of my poor step-father's changed relations towards her of late months.'

'No doubt, no doubt; her jointure fortunately could not be touched, else that fellow would have doubtless laid hands on everything. And yet to think how Sir Robert used to love you all!'

'Nay,' said Evelyn, 'since we are talking of such a subject, it must be remembered that dear, kind papa was no real kin of ours, and that when his affections for us were superseded —by whatever means—we have no ground for complaint that he turned his bounty into other channels. It is very hard on George, no doubt; but why should he have made heirs and heiresses of *us?* As a matter of fact—though it is shocking to talk of such things when so good a man has but just been laid in his grave —Mr. Walcot has just told me that I have been left a thousand pounds.'

The Curate threw up his hands. 'Yes. A thousand pounds to his favourite! How his mind must have been poisoned!'

At the same time the Curate's conscience smote him, because with his chagrin upon Evelyn's account was, in fact, mingled an involuntary feeling of pleasure upon his own. Since this girl was, after all, no heiress, she would be in that regard at least within his reach. He had been hitherto kept at a distance from her by the thought, 'She is Sir Robert's favourite step-daughter; she will no doubt have a large slice of fortune; to one in my position at least she will be an heiress;' and the Rev. John Dyneley was not of that large class of young divines who think heiresses are created for them. His pride forbad it, and also his humility of mind. He was not so great that he could despise the inequalities of wealth, nor was he so small that he was eager to remedy them when the chance offered itself in his own case. And yet now and then—in forbidden moments of luxury which the imagination at

times permits itself to all of us, except in the case of those ascetics whom the greatest of living writers compares with persons with colds in their heads, to whom life has no savour whether of good or bad—in some rare moments, I say, he had ventured to imagine that this girl was not wholly indifferent to him; his discovery that there was no bond of love between Gresham and herself had given him, as we have seen, an exquisite satisfaction; and though he had absented himself of late from her presence as much as was possible without exciting comment, it was only the more attractive to him, when, as now, it was by accident vouchsafed to him.

'You speak of a thousand pounds,' said Evelyn, smiling, 'as if it were a thousand pence. I don't know whether my brothers and sister have been similarly remembered; but, if so, we ought not to be pitied. I have heard you say yourself that money is like an elastic band which can be made to go far, or not, at the will of its possessor.'

'Yes,' he put in quickly, 'if he has been

accustomed to practise economy. I was speaking of such a person as myself—not of one like you. Our cases are very different. I have few wants, and some even of those I have of necessity'—here he gave a little sigh—'been compelled to forego; but *you*——'

'Nursed in the lap of luxury,' interrupted Evelyn, with mock gravity, 'enervated by indulgence, and the slave of fashion; I know what you are going to say.'

'Indeed, I was not going to say that, Evelyn,' he answered, hurriedly. 'I had no thought of blaming you; only when life has gone very smoothly with us, as it has with you, to find the road suddenly become rough or difficult; it will not, indeed, be very rough, thank Heaven, in your case, not toilsome——'

'And why, Mr. Dyneley, should you thank Heaven for that on my account?' interrupted Evelyn, with a touch of pride. 'Have you so low an opinion of me as to imagine that even poverty, had I to face it, would appal me; that its chill atmosphere would destroy me like

a butterfly who can only live in summer time?'

'No, no, Evelyn; you have never shrunk from duties from which other young ladies in your position might well have excused themselves'—he was referring to her constant visits among the parish poor; 'you need not look displeased. If I appear to wrong you in this matter, it is, Heaven knows, from no ill opinion of you; but you have always seemed to me one so far apart—above all vulgar needs, and—oh, Evelyn, if I had *my* will, the very breath of Heaven should never visit your cheek too roughly!'

'You are too tender-hearted, Mr. Dyneley, and too kind.'

'Yes; that is true,' he answered, sadly. 'I am too tender-hearted—that is to myself. Poor as I am, I have been extravagant enough to indulge myself in the luxury of a dream.'

He took her hand, and held it gently in his own. 'May I tell you my dream, the dream of my life, Evelyn?'

It was easy to read in his face what he had dreamt, and that he was dreaming still. She slowly disengaged her fingers from his hold, and answered, softly, 'Not to-day, Mr. Dyneley; not just now;' her eyes dropped upon her sable garb and stayed there; they shrank (though not with loathing, as they had done in Walcot's case) from the young man's impassioned gaze.

The Curate felt her reproof a just one; but that was not why he submitted to it with so good a grace; it was indeed no time to press a love-suit, but without pressing he felt the rapturous conviction that it would be granted. His friend and patron was lying newly dead in his own churchyard, but it was impossible for him in that hour of blossoming hope to keep his heart in mourning. As Evelyn and he walked slowly home together, side by side, he felt like one walking by an angel, to whom it is forbidden him to speak of Heaven.

The young ladies at Halcombe had a sanctum of their own, next the schoolroom, where

they were wont to pursue certain studies, and which was 'taboo' to all visitors; but, by virtue of his cousinship, George Gresham would occasionally venture thither when he had reason to believe that they were not within, but that Elise might be. She read German with them there most mornings, and in the afternoons would sometimes sit down at Milly's writing-desk, which was always at her disposal, and continue one of those interminable epistles to her aunt at Heidelberg which it is the habit of exiled German maidens in England to indite to their relatives in the Fatherland.

On his return from that interview with Lawyer Sturt at Mirton, Gresham had sought this apartment, with the excellent excuse of retailing what had happened to his fair cousins if he found them there, and if not—as occurred in this instance—to have a precious moment or two with Elise. He found her at the desk as usual, but without pen in hand, and her pleasant face had such unaccustomed traces of woe upon

it as prompted him immediately to remove them after Love's fashion.

'Oh, George, George!' she murmured, 'it is wrong to kiss me, wrong to love me; I am very, very wretched.'

'Your statements are inconsistent with one another, Elise mine,' was his prompt reply. 'If you are wretched there is the more necessity that I should kiss and comfort you; but what has happened?'

'I have been your ruin.'

'That is news, indeed,' he said. 'My own impression has long been the reverse of that, and is to-day stronger than ever, for you have given me something to live for and work for.'

'To work,' she repeated. 'Yes; but why has it become necessary for you to work at all? Oh, I have heard all about it from Millicent! You have been disinherited, and, alas! upon my account. I have been your ruin.'

'You said that before, darling, but the repetition of a statement does not make it a fact.

I have been disinherited by the machinations of a scoundrel to whom nevertheless I feel thankful, because he might have so contrived it that what has fallen to my share should only have been left me on condition of my not marrying you, in which case we should have had to marry on nothing at all. You are not so contaminated, I hope, by your connection with this nation of shopkeepers and millionaires as to call 5,000*l.* nothing?'

'No, George, no; in my eyes, of course, it is a fortune.'

'Well, come, that is a comfort. I thought you were going to jilt me because I was not rich enough.'

'How can you talk so? you know that it is not on my own account that I am so mi—mi—miserable. If I had only never met you on board that unlucky ship!'

'Oh, thank you!' put in Gresham, with a bow of acknowledgment. 'If you had only met somebody else instead, I admit it might have been better for you.'

'Not better for *me*, George, no; you are far too good for me—every way. But I selfishly allowed myself to be persuaded by you, and then Sir Robert came to know of our engagement—as I knew he would—and instead of your being made his heir, as would otherwise have been the case, he has left you next to nothing.'

'Next to nothing!' repeated Gresham, in mock amazement. 'She calls 5,000*l.* next to nothing. As to my own ability to gain a living, it is plain what she thinks of that. I am a fool and a beggar.'

'It is *I* that am the fool, and worse, to have beggared *you*,' answered Elise, bitterly. And once more she burst into tears.

'Now, my dear girl, don't cry, but listen to reason,' said Gresham, with tender gravity, 'and only see how a plain tale, as Mr. Raynes would say, shall put you down. The truth of the matter is, that in any case Ferdinand Walcot would have ousted me, as my uncle's heir, and put himself in my place.

My love for you may have been his excuse; but I feel convinced that if it had not been afforded him, he would have found another. Do you suppose, for example, if Evelyn and I had agreed to marry—which we could not have done—that *that* would have saved me?'

'No; that would not have saved you, George.'

Her tone was so significant that it attracted Gresham's attention. 'Well; I am glad you see that,' said he; 'but why are you so sure?'

'Because Mr. Walcot loves her himself.'

'What, *he*—that villain? Do you mean to say that he wanted to marry Evelyn?'

'Oh, yes; and really loved her, too, so far as he was capable of it. I saw that from the first.'

'What a clever girl you must be, Elise!'

'Not so,' she answered, simply: 'it was because I loved *you*, George.'

'I understand,' replied he, thoughtfully; 'that made you detect the diagnosis of the same malady in another. Well; I am glad I didn't

detect it, or I should have killed him. But are you quite sure?'

'Quite—more so to-day than ever; for I heard that Evelyn has been left only a thousand pounds; but the others three thousand. That was Mr. Walcot's doing, of course.'

'Yet that doesn't look as if he loved her.'

'Yes, it does. The poorer she was left, the more likely he thought she would be to accept his ill-gotten wealth, and him along with it.'

'My dear Elise, your sagacity alarms me. You should be placed at once at the head of the "Intelligence Department" of your beloved Fatherland. Why, even Mr. Sturt never thought of this.'

'I don't suppose Mr. Sturt is in love.'

'Well; I should be inclined to think he isn't,' admitted Gresham; 'or if he is, that his passion is not reciprocated. Does any one else know about this?'

'I think Millicent does.'

'Then Milly is in love too, I suppose?'

'There is no doubt of that—with your friend Mr. Mayne.'

'Then we're all in love together!' exclaimed Gresham, comically. 'I object, however, to Walcot's entertaining the same sentiments, or anything like them, as myself, and especially with regard to Evelyn. Do you think he has ventured to speak with her?'

'It is possible: he is not one to miss an opportunity.'

'If I had caught him at it,' observed Gresham, confidently, 'I would have pounded him to a jelly.'

'So would somebody else,' observed Elise, with significance.

'No? Do you really mean it? Then it must be Dyneley.'

'Of course it is. Mind, I don't think *he* has spoken to her. *He* is not one to take advantage of every opportunity of declaring himself, like Mr. Walcot, or Mr. George Gresham——'

'I object to being bracketed with that man in anything,' put in Gresham.

'Why so?' inquired Elise, innocently. 'He is clever and accomplished; and Millicent tells me he is now possessed of at least 12,000*l.* a year.'

'What nonsense! Supposing even he had 120,000*l.* a year, that would make no difference to Evelyn. I know her so well, and respect her so much.'

'I know it,' interrupted Elise, with a little sigh. 'It is a misfortune for you that you could not go a little farther; would that you had fallen in love with her instead of with me! It is all my selfishness that has prevented it.'

'That is quite true,' said Gresham, gravely. 'It is yourself, and yourself only, who has won my love—though not from any other woman. As for regretting it, my darling, your wisdom should teach you in any case not to cry over spilt milk; but it is my firm conviction that the present condition of affairs, though it may

seem untoward, will all work together for good —that is for my good, you know.'

She nodded; of course she understood that; what other's good could she be thinking about?

'I mean, Elise, instead of being an idle, worthless fellow, I now mean to make my own way in the world. My notion is to read for the Bar, and become Lord Chancellor.'

'Good,' she said. She did not understand the legal title, but recognised the plan as admirable.

'I should never have done a stroke of work for myself,' he went on, 'if I had been my uncle's heir; and you always said that idleness was so bad for me.'

'Is reading for the Bar and becoming Lord Chancellor very difficult, George?' inquired Elise, simply.

'Oh, dear, no! You want connections, that is all; if you were an attorney's daughter it would be the easiest thing in the world; but as it is, I know Lady Arden has a cousin who

is an attorney, and when I am ready for him she will ask him down to the Hall.'

'And in the meantime?' inquired Elise, gravely.

'Oh, in the meantime we shall marry!'

It was impossible to resist this genial and lighthearted young fellow, who parried the sharp stroke of Fate with a jest, and met all forebodings with a smile.

'It would be madness,' she murmured, while she suffered her last tear to be kissed away.

'It is a very common madness, darling,' said he, softly. 'Look yonder.'

He pointed to the window which commanded the whole valley, save those spots surrounded by the envious trees. Through the field that lay between the Hall and Farm ran a pleasant brook, beside which two figures were now lingering. These were Mayne and Millicent. They were looking down into the clear water—a position which offered the same opportunity of seeing one another as that of

being face to face, and had the advantage of not being so demonstrative.

'They are not thinking of drowning themselves—those two,' continued Gresham. 'And yet what *can* he be at?'

They were standing on the very brink, and Mayne was stooping down, with his hand in the water.

'It is where the forget-me-nots grow,' said Elise, softly.

'Ah, I see!' replied the young fellow; 'he is what the Americans call "bunching" her.'

CHAPTER IX.

MR. RAYNES DOES BUSINESS.

It is not to be supposed, although the love-making by the young couples at the Hall trod so very closely upon the heels of the death of its late head, that they were unmindful of his memory, or were embittered against him. His very demise had in fact, in at least two cases out of the three, left them free for the first time to openly avow their sentiments. For Gresham had been hitherto restrained (not of his own free will indeed, but through the influence of Elise) from the fear of giving Walcot an excuse for effecting his total ruin; and Dyneley, as we have seen, from the inequality of fortune which, while Sir Robert was

alive, seemed to place Evelyn out of his reach; while even Milly had now become in a manner her own mistress, and thereby gave a certain encouragement to Mayne to press his suit. It was natural enough, nor is it surely to be regretted, that even death's proximity cannot still the pulses of youth and love; yet a certain remorse was felt more or less by all of them, and especially by the young women, that they could nourish such tender and gracious thoughts at such a time.

The condition of Lady Arden, too, seemed a living reproof to them. Now that her indignation was no more excited by the presence of Walcot, her grief resumed its sway. She reproached herself with fancied shortcomings in her past relations with the dead man, and dwelt, with poignant sorrow, upon his many virtues of generosity and tenderness. It could justly be said of her, as is cynically written of widows in general, that she had never appreciated her husband's worth at its true value till she had lost him. She even charged herself—

most unjustly—with the change of late in his conduct towards her and hers.

The grief at home for Sir Robert's loss, in short, was so general and genuine, that it caused his neighbours some resentment, and induced them perhaps to somewhat underrate his good qualities. They had no patience with the folly that had made him the tool of a man whom they had all disliked and feared, and they resented as landed proprietors the diversion of his estate from its legitimate channel into the pockets of an adventurer. Such was the term they did not now hesitate to apply to Mr. Ferdinand Walcot; for after all, except that he was Sir Robert's brother-in-law, who was there that knew anything about him? The circumstances of that first marriage of the late Baronet were shrouded in mystery. There were Walcots in Debrett and Burke, but none of them were connections of the first Lady Arden. She herself was disposed of in the Baronetage in a very few lines, and of course under the head of 'Arden.' *Marr. June* 5, 18 —*Madeline, daughter of Mr.*

John Walcot.' A man who was not even an Esquire, and had apparently no fixed place of residence. A clever nobody is always looked upon with suspicions in a country neighbourhood, which, if he aggrandises himself, are naturally confirmed. Moreover, although Mr. Walcot was capable of attaching persons to his interest, and even of winning their regard, this was effected by superiority of intellect, and a certain personal influence which, while almost magical over individuals, failed with the general public altogether. The case is by no means uncommon, and has its parallel at St. Stephen's, where many men are popular whom the country at large refuses to accept, and *vice versâ.*

The general impression about Halcombe, I am obliged to say, was that the family at the Hall, and more especially George Gresham, had not only been wronged by Sir Robert's will, but that they had been swindled out of their rights: and that Mr. Ferdinand Walcot was the swindler.

Still, it is necessary to do business occasion-

ally with very disagreeable, and even dishonest, persons; and it came to pass that Lady Arden's friend and neighbour, Mr. Raynes, had a certain affair to transact with Mr. Walcot.

While Sir Robert was alive, he had felt a delicacy about asking him to sell the Four-Acre field, as it was called, contiguous to his own little property; but now that the field had fallen into new hands—not particularly clean ones, and which would certainly have no scruples about 'breaking up the estate,' if it should seem to his advantage—Mr. Raynes made his bid through his solicitor, Mr. Hayling.

To his surprise he received a note from Mr. Walcot himself to the effect that he declined, for private reasons, having any dealings with Mr. Hayling; but if, as an old acquaintance, Mr. Raynes chose to call upon him, any time he chanced to be in town, he had no doubt that the matter could be arranged to his satisfaction.

If Mr. Raynes had been like other people he might, perhaps, have hesitated to do business in this unusual fashion; but being a person *sui*

generis (on which the other had probably calculated), and being besides a very Ahab in his desire for the field in question, he at once resolved to accede to this suggestion. He accordingly ran up to town, and called on Mr. Walcot at his hotel, the 'Cosmopolitan.' He had timed his visit in the morning, in order to be sure to find him at home, yet not so early but that his surprise was somewhat excited at learning that Mr. Walcot had not yet breakfasted. He was, however, shown to his sitting-room, a very handsome one on the first floor, and had not long to await his coming. Mr. Raynes was not a man of keen observation, but the alteration in his old acquaintance's appearance struck him as very marked. A few months only had elapsed since he had last seen him, but if they had been as many years he would not have looked for so great a change. Mr. Walcot's features, always sharp, had become still more so; his complexion, always pale, was now almost colourless; and his eyes, formerly, as Mr. Raynes said to himself, 'the best part of the

fellow,' were no longer soft and lustrous, but haggard and cavernous, the very homes of care. 'I am sorry to be so late,' was his first greeting; 'in the country, you will be my witness, I used to keep better hours; but the fact is I don't sleep very well in London.'

Mr. Raynes thought to himself, 'You look as if you never slept at all;' but he felt no pity for the man on that account; that insulting proviso in Sir Robert's will that now haled poor Gresham up every morning at so unwelcome an hour (which everybody knew had been dictated by Walcot) occurred to him at once, and 'it serves the beggar right' was his reflection.

What he *said*, however, was, 'Ah! you are not used to the carts and the omnibuses.' And then he grinned from ear to ear, as though he had been delivered of an epigram.

'It is certainly noisier here than at Halcombe,' returned Mr. Walcot. 'By the bye' [here the waiter brought in the morning paper, and the speaker paused till he went out again] 'how are all the good folks at Halcombe?'

'All well in health, except, perhaps, Lady Arden, and even in her case I fancy that mental trouble has more to do with her state of health than——.'

'And the children?' interrupted Mr. Walcot.

'Oh! the boys are in high feather; indeed I think Frank is brighter than he used to be; the discredit that attached to the poor lad about the giant he met on his way from our house, until all was so happily cleared up, I do believe affected his spirits, for he seems quite another boy; as for the Great Baba, he is the same affable tyrant as ever.'

'But the others—the girls?'

'Oh! I didn't know you included them in your inquiry after the children; they are both as charming as ever, and, as you have doubtless heard, their charms have been appreciated.'

'I have heard nothing,' said Mr. Walcot, in a husky voice, the tones of which he endeavoured in vain to render indifferent.

'Miss Millicent is going to make a great match with Mr. Mayne, George Gresham's

friend; it is not going to come off just yet, I believe, though really, under the circumstances——'

And here Mr. Raynes began to stammer, remembering by whom the circumstances (namely, of Sir Robert's estrangement) had been brought about.

'And Evelyn?' inquired Mr. Walcot, taking up the *Times*.

This action—committed at the expense of courtesy—was intended to convey extreme indifference, and also, perhaps, to hide the workings of his countenance; but his companion noticed—and mentioned it afterwards—how the paper trembled in his hand.

'Well; they say she, too, is going to make a love match, though not so splendid a one as her sister. Rumour gives her to the Curate, Dyneley: one of the best of men. He was always very friendly with the family; but the affair has taken them all by surprise, I hear. The wedding, however, like her sister's, is not to come off just yet; whereas George

Gresham's—— You were aware, no doubt, of his *penchant* for the pretty little governess?'

Walcot bowed his head. It was not so much a gesture of assent, however, as the mechanical action of one who affects attention when his mind is far away.

'Well; he is going to make short work of it. There is an inconvenience, you see, in his intended's staying on at the Hall, as half friend, half governess; so the young couple are to be made one next month. The whole family are coming up to town, under pretence of getting her *trousseau*; but in reality, as I understand, in hopes to divert Lady Arden's melancholy.'

Here Mr. Raynes's unaccustomed flow of speech was arrested by the expression of his companion's face, which had suddenly become distorted as if from internal passion. His eyes, still fixed upon the paper, were starting almost out of his head, and his teeth were set together like those of one in a fit.

'Good heavens! is there anything the matter, Mr. Walcot?'

'With *me*? no.' The sudden distortion had disappeared, and was replaced by the old quiet smile of superiority. 'It is a weakness of mine, Mr. Raynes, to show my feelings, when any act of wrong or cruelty is brought under my notice. I had the discourtesy to cast my eyes on such a case in to-day's paper while you were addressing me; pardon me. With respect to this Four-Acre field, then, you were saying——'

'I have said nothing about it yet,' observed Mr. Raynes with an aggrieved air; for he felt that he had been wasting his breath for the last ten minutes.

'This is the map of the estate,' said Mr. Walcot, pointing to where it hung on the walls; 'there have been a great number of nibbles at it; but I wished to sell the whole to one man. However, in your case, I shall be glad to serve an old friend.'

Mr. Raynes did not altogether relish this compliment; but he bowed his acknowledgments nevertheless.

'I was thinking that ten pounds an acre

would be a fair price for such land as that, Mr. Walcot; you see it is rather an outlying bit, and doesn't spoil the symmetry of the Halcombe property, as it were;' and he indicated with his finger the situation of the spot in question.

As there was no reply, he turned his head, and there was Mr. Walcot poring once more over the newspaper, as though he had been alone in the room. He had certainly no intention of being discourteous, for the next moment he was profuse in his apologies.

'To be frank with you, Mr. Raynes, I am not myself this morning. It is unusual with me, as you know, to exhibit such weakness; but I have seen here the death of an old friend. Once more, forgive me. You shall have the Four-Acre field at a reasonable price.'

'I named ten pounds an acre,' observed Mr. Raynes.

'Then so let it be. If you will only put the matter in legal form, but not through Mr. Hayling, if you please—I have my own reasons

for declining to do business with that gentleman —you may consider the matter settled.'

'I am really obliged to you, Mr. Walcot. I am sorry I should have brought ill news with me——'

'Who *said* you had brought ill news?' inquired the other, with irritation.

'Nay; I only meant the coincidence of my calling on so unfortunate a morning. You said a friend had died.'

'True, true. Is it too early to offer you any refreshment? Good morning, then; *good* morning.'

'I have got the field,' soliloquised Mr. Raynes, when he found himself outside the door, 'and I have escaped from a madman! What the deuce can be the matter with the man? He's off his head for certain. I believe I could have bought the land for five pounds an acre. However, it is a good bargain as it stands, and I'll get it ratified at once. I mustn't go to Hayling, it seems; but there's that Mr. Sturt, Mayne's lawyer. I'll go to *him*.'

As a cab drove away from the door of the 'Cosmopolitan,' its commissionaire stood staring after it with his mouth at fullest stretch—a faint reflex of the grimace with which Mr. Raynes had favoured him instead of sixpence.

'Well, I'm blessed,' exclaimed that astonished official, 'if *ever* I seed a gentleman grin so!'

CHAPTER X.

MR. STURT SUGGESTS A SEA VOYAGE.

Mr. Sturt was not Mayne's family lawyer, as Mr. Raynes had concluded, but was employed by him, at the detective's suggestion, for the especial purpose with which we are acquainted. To give instructions for drawing conveyances of landed property was not in his usual line of business; but, of course, he never turned away good money from his door. Moreover, Mr. Raynes's face was welcome to him as being connected, however indirectly (he had been introduced to him by his employer down at Mirton) with that great case of Walcot *versus* Everybody, which was attracting so great a share of his attention. For though all seemed lost, Mr. Bevill still kept strict, though secret, watch over

'his gentleman's' movements, and reported them to the lawyer almost daily. It was unlikely, of course, that innocent Mr. Raynes should throw even the smallest scintilla of light upon the motives of so discreet and wily a man as Walcot; but then it was Mr. Sturt's experience that light came from very unexpected places, and he was always on the look-out for it. He was an astute man, nor will I do him so great a wrong—professionally—as to hint that a too delicate sense of personal honour ever stood in his way; but he was really somewhat too blunt and honest—at all events in manner—for his particular line of business. This disadvantage arose partly, perhaps, from his having so much to do with mere agents—such as Mr. Bevill himself—with whom it was well to be curt and decisive, to prevent (among other things) their ideas as to certain lines of conduct over-riding his own. With individual members of the public, even when he felt they might be pumped to advantage, he had not a winning way, like Mr. Walcot, nor even a patient and courteous

one, like Mr. Hayling. Fortunately his new client, though naturally taciturn, was so elated by his having got the promise of the Four-Acre field, that he was on this occasion inclined to be garrulous.

'You found Mr. Walcot friendly, it seems,' observed the lawyer, when the business matter had been arranged.

'Well—yes—he made no objection to my proposal, that is; but he struck me as queer, sir—very queer.'

'Queer?' repeated the lawyer. 'Um—now, would you mind—I know you are a friend of the family at Halcombe, Mr. Raynes—would you mind just giving me your impressions?'

This was not the sort of proposal that would have been made to one like Mr. Raynes by a good judge of character. He was a man unequal to consecutive narration, which is as much an art in its way as speaking when on one's legs.

'Oh! I don't know about impressions; I told him the news you know—what I thought

would interest him—about the young ladies at the Hall—and he was glum—very glum. Since he'd got their money, I thought he would not have grudged their being settled in life, yet somehow he seemed to do so.'

'Seemed to grudge Miss Millicent making a great match, did he?'

'Well, yes; and even her sister's marrying the Curate. I fancied, indeed, he looked blacker at that news than at the other.'

Mr. Sturt nodded encouragingly.

'You are an observant man, Mr. Raynes,' he said.

'I don't know about observant,' answered that gentleman, modestly; 'nobody can help noticing a fellow when he has fits.'

'Did Mr. Walcot have a fit?'

'I think he must have had one—in his inside. I never saw a man make such faces.' And at the remembrance of them Mr. Raynes made a face himself which threw all fits—of merriment at least—completely into the shade.

'What did he make faces at? Miss Evelyn's marriage?'

'No; at something which caught his eye in the newspaper. It was quite sudden, and seemed to seize him like the spasms. He said he was subject to them, whenever he read any case of injustice and cruelty in the Police Reports.'

'In the Police Reports?'

'Well, I am not sure he said that; but what he saw must have been in the Police Reports, I suppose, or else in the Criminal Trials. At all events he seemed terribly shocked.'

'It must have been a very bad case,' observed the lawyer, drily.

'And yet it had its attractions, for when I was talking to him about the field he paid no sort of attention, but kept his eye on the same page. Then he apologised, and said he was not himself, inasmuch as he had just lost a dear friend.'

'Was that in the paper too?'

'So I understood him to say; though it

seems funny, doesn't it? Two events in the same morning's *Times* each of which brings on fits! If he reads the papers much it must try his constitution.'

'Was he giving his attention to the main body of the paper, or to the supplement?'

'Oh! it was not the supplement.'

'Then his lost friend must have been a remarkable man, and had a paragraph all to himself. Ordinary folks, you know, all die in the supplement.'

'I never thought of that!' said Mr. Raynes, admiringly. 'You're a deep one, Mr. Sturt, *you* are.'

'I have to do with deepish people, at all events,' observed the lawyer, deprecatingly. 'Mr. Walcot is one of them. That being the case, may I ask you, whether you do not think it possible that that whole pantomime'—— He paused, and held his finger up in an impressive manner.

'I'm all there,' interposed Mr. Raynes, with confidence; there flashed a grin across his face

from ear to ear, and the next moment it became an imperturbable monument of gravity: the change could only be compared to the instantaneous action of the slide of a magic lantern.

'I say are you quite certain, Mr. Raynes, that Mr. Walcot's emotion at the news in the paper—whatever it was—was not assumed, in order perhaps to hide his chagrin at something else; the tidings you yourself conveyed to him, for example?'

'I am quite sure,' answered Mr. Raynes, resolutely. 'He was all doubled up for the moment as though you had poked him in the ribs—like that.' And he made a playful movement at the lawyer with his forefinger which at once caused Mr. Sturt to contract his learned person in illustration. It was as though you had suddenly touched the extremities of an immense fat spider, who becomes a mere ball upon the instant.

Mr. Sturt was by nature dignified; but no peculiarities of his clients ever put him out of

temper, though if they tried it too severely the circumstance was recorded indirectly in his little account.

'Well, as you say, Mr. Raynes [he had said nothing of the kind], there may be little enough in all this; but, at all events, it's curious. All revelations of human nature are interesting, even if nothing comes of them.—I have your full instructions, I believe, as to the purchase of the field?'

'The Four-Acre field that borders on the sunk fence of my lawn,' said Mr. Raynes, with particularity; as though the little map which, thanks to Mr. Hayling, he had taken the precaution to bring with him, were not sufficient, and he should find himself the proprietor of some central strip of Halcombe Moor instead.

'I should wish the thing to be done as soon as may be, for Mr. Walcot is rather a slippery customer.'

'Indeed?' replied Mr. Sturt, lifting his eyebrows (the only physical exercise except blow-

ing his nose, he ever allowed himself). 'Well, at all events, you may rely on me to lose no time.'

If Mr. Raynes could have been present in the spirit for the next two hours after his departure from the lawyer's office in the flesh, he would have had cause to doubt this last assurance of Mr. Sturt; for, instead of immediately applying himself to the acquisition of the Four-Acre field, that gentleman gave his attention for that period solely to the *Times* newspaper. With business men, indeed, this is not considered to be losing time—otherwise there is more time lost in places where time is said to be money than would serve to pay off the National Debt; but the way in which Mr. Sturt went to work with his study of the paper was peculiar.

He first gave his attention to the Police Reports (which are somewhat neglected in the City, except by quite junior partners), and at once lighted upon a case of skinning cats alive, in order, as the prisoner observed in extenua-

tion of his conduct, 'to preserve the gloss upon the skin.'

'Ah! that's it,' exclaimed Mr. Sturt, not in sympathy with the offender, but because he had found what he sought. 'That's the paragraph, of course, by which "my gentleman," as Bevill calls him, would have explained his sudden emotion; now I wonder what it was that really moved him so! "Loss of an emigrant ship with five hundred souls on board;" what does *he* care about lost souls? "Proposed Tunnel in Mount Cenis"—he can't see his way through *that* to anything. "The interrupted communication to Australia caused by the breaking of the submarine cable last year will be, we are informed, resumed within a few days." Um! He was in Australia once; and was about to go there again. This may be worth noting. "Failure of the Grand United Bank." *That* won't hurt him; he is much too sharp a fellow to have put his money there. I'm much mistaken if he doesn't carry it in his breast-pocket —or thereabouts; all the better for us when

we get hold of him. "Dean Asbestos at Westminster Abbey on the Future State of the Wicked." No; he doesn't look so far ahead as that. What the deuce *can* it be, that made a fellow of that kind show his hand, even for a moment, to a man like Raynes? It must have been something *vital.* I see nothing here. "Let A. B. communicate at once with C. D.; the danger is imminent." No, no; he'd never trust to the second column of the *Times* for anything. These cyphers, too, can have nothing to do with him; he's not one for child's play——'

Here the door opened, and in came, unannounced, a red-haired, red-faced man, in the uniform of an hotel porter, but with a flower in his mouth, which in the lower classes betrays a tendency to mental abstraction.

'Great news, Mr. Sturt,' said he, laconically; 'No. 842 is going to hook it.'

'I *thought* as much,' cried the lawyer, excitedly; 'the devil is kicking him somewhere or another. Do you know where, Bevill?'

'No, indeed; I think I have found out

enough in an hour and a half,' answered the other, pettishly; 'and near broken my back beside with cording his boxes. He's off to the London Docks after a ship—so much is certain; and it sails to-morrow.'

Mr. Sturt was already running his eyes down the 'shipping advertisements.'

'Are you sure you don't mean St. Katharine's Docks?' he said.

'Perhaps; I did not hear the orders given to the cabman, myself; it was the commissionaire who told me.'

'Bevill, can you go on board ship to-night, for a longish voyage?' inquired the lawyer, gravely.

'Of course I can.'

'You will afterwards, may be, have to remain in a foreign country for an uncertain time; will that suit you?'

'To a T. I shall perfect myself in the language.'

'Very good; in this case, however, you will know nothing of it to begin with.'

'Oh, Lud! Then it ain't the Continent,' answered Mr. Bevill.

'Can you speak German?'

Here the detective brightened up again: modern languages were his strong point in his own opinion; and indeed he spoke them, not with servile accuracy, but in a most original manner.

'When I talk German, Mr. Sturt,' he replied, confidently, 'it would take a cleverish fellow to find out I was not a native.'

'Well; you must talk German and nothing else throughout the voyage; and even then, though our friend does not speak it, it will be safer to take a fore cabin ticket. He can't escape you on board ship; when he lands, you must keep your eye upon him, and let us know his movements.'

Mr. Bevill winked the organ alluded to in the most significant manner. 'Enough said between friends,' it seemed to say; 'I have kept this eye on my gentleman before.'

'Here is a cheque to bearer, and buy what-

ever you are likely to want; but first of all secure your passage on board the "Bothnia" from St. Katharine's Docks for Christiania.'

'Christiania! Very good, sir. It's nothing to *me*, of course,' observed Mr. Bevill, indifferently; 'but in what part of the world may Christiania happen to be?'

'It is in Norway.'

'Very good, sir. Let it be Norway by all means. You will excuse me, sir; but I was once on board of a ship with him, in which he didn't sail after all—very nearly sent me on a wild goose chase of 15,000 miles or so—how do you know for certain my gentleman is *going* to Norway?'

'Well; if you've any doubts,' said the lawyer, smiling, 'you had better ask at the booking-office whether a first-class berth was not taken by one answering his description between ten and twelve this morning. But, as a matter of fact, he *is* going. He has been frightened by something he read in the paper this morning—I wish I knew what—and is leaving England

in hot haste. He chooses Norway, my good Bevill, because we have no extradition treaty with that country; a man may live there in peace and quietness upon another Englishman's money, however he became possessed of it. And even if he has committed murder the law can't lay a finger on him.'

'Do you think it *is* murder, Mr. Sturt?' inquired Mr. Bevill, dropping his voice to a confidential tone.

'I don't know what to think, my man. It's the strangest case I ever had to do with; but that there's Something wrong with Mr. Ferdinand Walcot, and *very* wrong, I am as certain as I am of my own existence.'

CHAPTER XI.

ANNABEL'S CONFESSION.

Mr. Sturt had the fullest powers from Mr. Mayne to do anything that seemed likely to forward the coming off of that long-looked-for return match between the latter and Mr. Ferdinand Walcot; and, as we have seen, he had not hesitated to despatch Mr. Bevill at a moment's notice to Christiania, for thither, indeed, had Mr. Walcot betaken himself. Nor until that gentleman had set sail did the lawyer think it necessary to inform his employer of what had been done. Then he wrote down to Halcombe, where Mr. Mayne was still residing, as though he were already one of the family, the details of what had happened. 'It is my fixed opinion,' he said, 'that matters have come to some

sort of crisis with our opponent, which has caused him to leave England. We know he is not given to field sports of any kind, such as fishing; and that he cares nothing for the beauties of nature; what then could have taken him at an hour's notice to such a country as Norway, except the necessity of putting himself out of the reach of the law? Any one but yourself would doubtless say, "What is the use of sending a detective to look after a man who has thus secured impunity for his (supposed) transgression?" But I know this will not be *your* view. Bevill will stick to him like his shadow —a shadow thrown behind him, and always unseen. He is certainly a first-rate hand. His name, from last night, when he went on board, will be Herr Landemann, a gentleman in the timber trade (a calling he professes to know something about), whose house at Homburg has relations with London and Christiania. He wears gold spectacles, and has already a wooden look. . . . I send you, in case you may not have it at the Hall, a copy of the

newspaper that contains, I am persuaded, the key of Walcot's departure. Perhaps the sharp wits of the young ladies may decipher this riddle, which has for the present baffled me. It will be well also to cross-examine Mr. Raynes afresh; the chance of whose getting that Four-Acre field is, I am afraid, becoming very problematical. It is curious, by the bye, and, to me, inexplicable, why Walcot has not disposed of the Halcombe property; he would have had to do so, doubtless, at a loss, but where time (as it now seems) was of such vital consequence to him, why did he not realise? Reflect on all these matters, and give me your views.'

Mayne not only reflected, but called others into consultation. It was a blow to him that Walcot had withdrawn himself from England, and to a spot where no one could touch him, for he cherished quite as warmly as Mr. Sturt the idea that the man had committed some criminal act, and had been much more sanguine of inflicting retribution on him; but, since he

had undoubtedly fled his native land, a certain reticence which had been hitherto maintained about him at the Hall was no longer observed. Not only did Mayne put the case to the members of the family (which, of course, included Gresham and the Curate) as Mr. Sturt had recommended, but the subject became openly talked about at the dinner-table, as it had never been before. So Mr. Parker the butler learnt that Mr. Ferdinand Walcot had sailed for some place with the geographical position of which he was no better acquainted than Mr. Bevill had been. 'What d'ye think?' said he to the cook at supper; 'that 'ere Walcot has gone clean away to Christianity.'

'Lor', who'd ha' thought it?' she replied. 'He give no signs of going there while he was with us, that's sure and sartin.'

'I mean Christianity, the *place*, ma'am,' observed the butler, with dignity.

'Ah! that's another thing, Mr. Parker.'

On which the conversation dropped; perished prematurely, through deficiency of

knowledge, as when the theory of Development is started at a kettledrum.

The seed, however, was carried up to the upper regions by a nursery maid, and found root in a wholly unlooked-for quarter.

On the following morning, when Gresham, 'the early bird,' as he was facetiously called (for he never ran the risk of losing his narrowed fortune by being in bed after seven o'clock), was taking his usual walk before breakfast with his Elise, she put the following question to him: 'You know Nannie Spence, of course, George?'

He shook his head. 'I am very sorry; but, even though it argues myself unknown, I don't know the young lady.'

'Nonsense; I mean Annabel Spence, the young ladies' maid. You must have surely seen her, if it was only at prayers.'

'I don't look at young ladies' maids at prayers,' he replied, stolidly; 'but it is true that I have seen Annabel.'

'Of course; and, having seen her, you could

not easily forget her. She is very pretty, though rather strange-looking. Her hair is light, but her eyes and complexion are like a gipsy's; if she were not so young, one would think she wore a wig. Well; she is a strange girl, very reserved and reticent, but to my astonishment last night she asked to speak with me in private. We have been always very good friends—for like me, poor girl, she is an orphan, and we arrived here together, strangers to everybody, almost on the same day—but hitherto she has never given me her confidence. She did not say much on this occasion, though I could see she was deeply moved, but only begged that I would procure her an interview with Mr. Mayne. The request was strange enough; but her manner was so very extraordinary that, though she imposed secresy, I thought I would take your advice about it.'

'Quite right; but I would not mention it to others, if I were you,' said Gresham, gravely.

'Of course not. You think with me that the poor girl may be out of her mind?'

'It is possible; but it is not likely that she will bite Mayne; and he will judge, from the communication she makes, whether she is mad or not.'

Accordingly, after breakfast, George Gresham took his friend aside, and, not without a humorous twinkle in his eyes, informed him that a certain young person had expressed an earnest wish to renew her acquaintance with him; 'tender passages have passed between you, old fellow, but I sincerely hope, though she is actually in the house——'

'Who on earth is it?' inquired Mayne, turning a lively red.

'It's Annabel Spence, the ladies' maid. She wants to have another interview with you in private.'

'Never!' cried Mayne, resolutely.

'But the poor thing is really in a distressed state of mind—wishes, perhaps, to apologise——'

'I accept it, at second hand,' interrupted Mayne, with alacrity. 'Only I won't see her alone. Nothing shall induce me.'

'But I will be a witness to the interview.'

'You won't do, my dear fellow. You don't know what a girl that is. No layman will be a sufficient security. If Dyneley will stand by me, then—if she really insists upon it—I'll see her.'

So they went across to the Manor Farm, and spoke to the Curate.

'I'll be Mayne's witness, of course,' he said; 'though it is rather hard upon the girl.'

'Hard upon the girl!' exclaimed Mayne. 'You're as bad as Walcot. What has the girl to complain of? It is I who am the injured innocent.'

'Well, of course you are, my dear fellow,' said the Curate, soothingly. 'But here's a friendless girl about to own herself to blame in a very delicate matter; and in presence of two men.'

'*That*, of course, makes it much more embarrassing,' observed Gresham, parenthetically.

'Yes; at least two,' replied Mayne, earnestly, 'and one of them a clergyman.'

'Well, of course, that makes it very

embarrassing, one of them being a clergyman?' inquired Gresham parenthetically.

'Nonsense. I mean on account of there being two persons,' exclaimed Dyneley. 'She has done very wrong, poor girl, but at the dictation of another; and we know how he has put the screw on other people—Gilbert Holm, for instance. Perhaps it was a mistake not to tell Lady Arden all about it at the time; but, since that was not done, let byegones be byegones.'

'By all means,' said Mayne, precipitately. 'Tell her all is forgotten and forgiven, and that she needn't trouble herself to confess anything.'

'Nay,' said Dyneley; 'she may have some disclosure to make respecting Walcot.'

'Ah, that's another thing!' replied Mayne, thinking of his return match. 'If Gresham yonder will stop his sniggering'—this was in allusion to certain paroxysms of suppressed laughter to which that gentleman was giving way at very short intervals—'and you will stand by me—close by me—I'll hear what the young lady has to say.'

'She had better come over to the Manor Farm,' proposed Gresham, drily.

'No, no,' replied the Curate, hastily. 'She can see us in the smoking-room at the Hall.'

'Well, upon my word!' exclaimed the Incorrigible.

'I quite agree with you,' said Mayne, 'that that would be very indecorous. Besides, this poor girl (here he imitated the Rev. John Dyneley's pathetic tones) may object to smoke.'

'What do you think of the summer-house?' suggested Gresham, wickedly.

It was at last arranged that the interview should take place in the schoolroom, when the children should have gone out.

Thither accordingly Gresham and the Curate secretly repaired after luncheon, and found Annabel awaiting them. She rose from her chair as they entered, put the work on which she was engaged quietly aside, and made them a deep curtsy.

There was nothing impudent or defiant in her manner; but it was one obviously above

her supposed station in life. A ladies' maid might have been excused, under the circumstances, if she had shown signs of nervousness; and one would have expected a 'sob' rather than a curtsy. Her face was pale, but very determined-looking; and it was a pretty face—soft and intellectual too, as well as pretty—in spite of that anomaly in the colours of the hair and complexion to which Elise had alluded.

'I am sorry to have troubled you, gentlemen,' said she; 'but the time has come for me to disclose certain matters.' Her voice, which was soft and gentle, was in strange contrast to the expression of her features, which was that of some overmastering passion. 'Is it certain, may I ask, that Mr. Walcot has left England, for good?'

'He has left it for Norway,' observed Mayne, with keen significance.

'I understand you,' she said, 'and I agree with you.'

Mayne was astonished, for her voice was not that which had spoken to him in the

summer-house, nor yet which had falsely accused him in the presence of Sir Robert.

'I have behaved to you very ill, Mr. Mayne, but not one-tenth part so ill as the man of whom we speak—and who set me on to do it—has behaved to me. I have tried to do you a mischief who never harmed me; but I have not perjured myself to wrong one who trusted in him, as this man has done. You may punish me without mercy, only I beseech you to punish him, and without mercy also; to put him in prison, to scourge him, to kill him, if it be possible, though whatever you did to him it would fall short of his deserts.'

It was easy to see, in the force and fury with which the woman spoke, that this man had deserted her, and both her hearers—being men—were touched by the spectacle.

'His sin will find him out,' observed Mr. Dyneley, in his ecclesiastical manner (his natural one not being just then at his command) 'Revenge is not befitting us poor mortals, who

need, ourselves, forgiveness. If this man has wronged you, Annabel——'

'*If* he has wronged me!' she broke in with impetuous passion. 'I tell you, that never since the world was made has man wronged woman as this man has wronged me. Your looks are pitiful, but I do not want your pity. I want your help to redress my wrongs, and there is only one way to do that—to avenge them.'

'I will do my best,' said Mayne; 'so help me Heaven!'

'You will?' exclaimed she, sharply. 'You, whom I have done *my* best to injure? You, whom I strove to drive away from this roof in disgrace and shame? You, whose name I would have sullied, if I could, in the ears of her who loves you? I swear, up to this moment, though I knew all that, I have felt neither remorse nor regret; I have felt nothing—*nothing*—but my own fears and hopes—and, of late, my wrongs. *Why?* Because my whole nature has been marred and twisted by that villain to his own ends. I was the offspring of

most unhappy parents; but born a gentlewoman. That matters little now; if I had good blood once, it has been poisoned. And, oh Heaven! I was so young—so very young.'

For the first time her voice trembled. She hid her face in her little hands, and rocked from side to side, as if in physical agony.

'I beg of you not to distress yourself by these references to the past,' said Mayne, gently. 'We are quite prepared to take for granted any villany committed by Ferdinand Walcot: to have been young, and unprotected, and confiding, was to have invited wrong from such a man.'

'I thank you, sir,' she answered, simply; 'it seems strange, even to myself, that I should still feel the pangs of shame; but I do feel them. I felt them when I stood before Sir Robert and that other man, and uttered those lies against you; but they are keener now. You are the last man who should wish to spare me one of them. Still, since you are so kind, I will forbear to dwell on that part of my life, though

the recital of it would be a part of my just punishment. Let it suffice to say that when this man had ruined me, body and soul, he set me this task to do: to blaspheme the memory of a dead woman, by representing myself as her departed spirit. Behold her!'

'Gracious Heavens!' exclaimed the Curate.

She had risen to her feet, and torn away the flaxen wig that concealed her natural hair, which was now disclosed, short, black, and curling, like a boy's, but exquisitely fine.

'If you have ever seen a picture of the late Lady Arden,' she continued, 'you will perceive a certain resemblance which ends, alas! with my mere looks. She was a pure, simple, kindly creature, and strove to be kind to me when I was an orphan child. I have repaid her by personating her gentle spirit, in order that a weak but noble nature should be induced to commit grievous wrongs on those who loved him, and who have been very kind to me. You stand with pity in your eyes—you two—instead

of shrinking from me; that is because you do not believe my words, but think me mad. I tell you it is all true,—as true as hell!'

'Annabel Spence, we know it is true,' said the Curate, gently. 'We pity you because you were the tool of a stronger will, on which the true guilt rests.'

'No, sir; no,' she answered, sorrowfully. 'It was not his will alone; I did it that he might do me tardy justice. I did it—I do not say for love of him—but for a bribe: if I succeeded in the crime proposed, I was to be his wife. I did succeed,—and he has deserted me.'

Mayne drew a long breath between his clenched teeth, and murmured 'Villain!' It was like the hissing of a serpent, and boded no less ill.

'If it is not too painful for you, Annabel,' said the Curate, 'will you supply us with the details of your deception?'

'They were innumerable, sir. I have been a fraud and a counterfeit from the first moment

when—indirectly recommended by that man—I came under this roof. He taught me the dead woman's songs, and I sang them outside Sir Robert's chamber. I spoke the words Walcot put into my mouth in her living tones; at last, and without my disguise, I personated her very presence, and held converse with her unhappy husband as though I had risen from her very grave. It was through me that that unjust will was made, by which all who had shown me kindness here were recompensed by disinheritance, and the wickedest of villains was enriched.'

'Poor Sir Robert!' mused the Curate, sorrowfully.

'Yes, indeed,' she resumed; 'he, too, is dead, and knows now that I deceived him. Miserable, crime-stricken wretch that I am! I yet dare not die, lest somewhere, somewhere—though, alas! there is no Heaven for me—I may meet them both.'

'My good girl,' observed Mr. Mayne, unconscious of the inapplicability of his epithet,

'you distress yourself too much about this matter. The dead cannot be injured by the living; and, you may depend upon it, have forgiven you any harm you may have plotted against them. I am sure I can answer for Sir Robert at least, and as for the lady—she may not have thought much of your acting of her original part; we know what the professionals think of the amateurs; but not even the women, be sure, bear malice up yonder,' and he pointed through the open window to the summer sky.

The naturalness of Mayne's cheerful tones seemed to mingle with the atmosphere of morbid woe in which the unhappy girl had environed herself, as a breeze meets the mist and thins it.

'You, sir, who are all kindness and forgiveness,' she said, with a wan smile, 'judge others by yourself, and the result is harmony and happiness; the same test applied to me begets despair.'

'Annabel Spence, who educated you?' inquired Mr. Dyneley, suddenly.

'Ferdinand Walcot.'

'I guessed as much,' continued the Curate, drily. 'You have learnt his character; and you must now make haste to unlearn his teaching. As it happens, what there is in you of good—and, in spite of what you tell us, I am sure there is much good—works just now for ill with you. If you were like himself, impenitent and callous, his lessons would serve you better—for the nonce—than those you have now to learn. With all his wickedness, he is probably the less wretched of the two. But it will not always be so, Annabel, nor for long. Your eyes are opened at last. You have taken the first step that leads to peace and joy; and you shall be led thither.

'God help me! who shall lead me?' she cried, in despairing tones.

The Curate's huge hirsute face was mellowed with that light of charity and loving kindness which forms, doubtless, the raw material for saints' halos. He held out his great hand to her, and answered, '*I* will.'

'You're a deuced good fellow, Dyneley,' murmured Mayne. Perhaps, like many men of his class, he had thought a clergyman would have shrunk from undertaking a case of this sort—which, indeed, was likely to prove a very delicate and difficult one—and that he would at most have prescribed for it. It is one thing to throw a plank to a drowning creature, but quite another to jump in and save her.

Then for the first time the girl burst into tears.

'Don't cry, *don't* cry,' pleaded Mayne; the tears growing nearer to his own eyes than they had been since he left his mother's knee.

'Nay, let her grief have way,' whispered the Curate, wisely; 'it is better outside than in, poor soul!'

Presently she grew calmer, and asked humbly whether she need assume her disguise again.

'Yes, Annabel,' said the Curate, gently, 'it is necessary for the present; you are no longer a counterfeit, remember; but we must

not set all the tongues in the servants' hall wagging.'

'As you please, sir,' she answered, gently. 'It is a very small penance for what I have done. I thought to punish myself by confessing to Mr. Mayne in person, and—oh, how kind you have both been to me!'

'Still, my poor girl, the way of transgressors must needs be hard, even when they repent,' observed the Curate, gravely. 'It will be necessary for you to repeat what you have said to us to Mr. Sturt, who will set it down in writing.'

'Why so?' protested Mayne; 'let bygones be bygones.'

'If you were alone concerned, I would say "by all means," replied the Curate; 'but there are other interests to be consulted. What we have heard to-day are surely proofs of that "undue influence," if not of fraud, for which we have been looking so long. I am much mistaken if they will not upset the will.'

'But the damned scoundrel is in Sweden, out of our reach!' exclaimed Mayne.

'For shame, sir; for shame!' ejaculated the Curate. 'It is shocking to exhibit such bitterness at such a time, and in the presence of this unhappy, but truly penitent, girl. Annabel, I charge you, in the name of Him I serve, and by virtue of my sacred office, to cast out from your mind all feelings of revenge and hate against this evildoer. He has wronged you, but you have wronged others; if you do not forgive him, how can you hope for God's forgiveness?'

'Oh, sir! you cannot guess——' murmured the poor girl.

'Yes, Annabel, I *can* guess; I know that he has heaped wrong on wrong upon you, beyond all human power of forgiveness; but I trust, nay, I believe, that your poor humanity will be aided in this matter by Divine grace. You must forgive Ferdinand Walcot.'

Annabel shook her head. 'If I say it with my lips, I shall not feel it in my heart,' she cried. 'But I will try. Yes, for your sake, I will try.'

'Not for my sake, but for your own,' urged the good priest; 'and not for your own, so much as for His who has taught us all to forgive our enemies.'

The unhappy girl turned perplexedly from one to the other. On the face of the priest sat an inflexible determination; on that of the layman an encouraging smile.

'Mr. Dyneley is quite right, Annabel,' he said; 'tell him you will do your best to forgive this fellow.'

'I will do my best, sir,' she answered, humbly. 'I will say no more, please, gentlemen, just now.' With that she laid her face in her hands once more, and began rocking herself to and fro in a passion of tears.

'Poor soul, poor soul! we will leave her for the present,' whispered the Curate. And they left her to herself and her sorrow accordingly.

'It was a sad scene,' said Dyneley, 'was it not, old fellow?' as they went softly down the stairs.

'Yes, indeed; I had half a mind to give her a word of comfort at parting; and I would have done it but for you.'

'But for *me?* What do you mean?'

'Well; I wanted to tell her that she might forgive Walcot with all her heart and a clear conscience; for that *I* never intend to do it till I've brought him on his knees. She had only to shift the responsibility of seeing justice done on to my shoulders.'

'My dear Mayne, it is my duty to tell *you* as I told her,' said the Curate, gravely, 'that vengeance is not becoming a Christian man. Heaven will take this man into its own hand.'

'Just so; all in good time, no doubt; but in the meanwhile I consider myself retained on the same side. You may think it a personal matter with me, but there you're mistaken. I am not thinking of myself, but of the wrongs of that poor girl up yonder. Forgive him! No; I'll see him *nearer* first, and then bring his nose to the grindstone, or my name is not Frederic Mayne.'

CHAPTER XII.

THE GHOST IN COVENT GARDEN.

THE importance of the confession of Annabel Spence had not been overrated by Mr. Dyneley. In Mr. Sturt's opinion, or rather in that of his counsel, it afforded ample grounds for disputing the late Sir Robert's will, if not for a criminal prosecution of Ferdinand Walcot. The latter measure was out of the question, as that astute gentleman had withdrawn himself from British jurisdiction; but certain proceedings were at once initiated in the former matter. Walcot had really told the truth to Mr. Raynes when he said that the Halcombe estate had not yet been disposed of. For some reason or other, he had been in no hurry to realise the landed property that had fallen to him, and formal notice was

given to the solicitors he had appointed in place of Mr. Hayling, not to part with the title deeds, the same having been obtained by fraud. These gentlemen, a most respectable firm, replied that the title deeds were not in their possession, and that for the present they were unable to communicate with their client, who had gone abroad without leaving his address.

'We know more about the gentleman than they do,' observed Mr. Sturt, triumphantly, when he received their epistle; for he had at that moment a telegram in his desk from Mr. Bevill, with a certain address at Christiana. He was much more hopeful about getting back the estates for Gresham—to whom, as next-of-kin, they would revert in case of the will being made void—than that young gentleman was himself.

'Why, I have not yet received even my poor 5,000*l.* to go to law with,' was his lugubrious remark, when they were talking on this subject during the lawyer's now frequent visits to the Hall.

'And a good thing, too,' said Mr. Sturt; 'for when the limit of time allowed by law for withholding it is passed, we can bring an action against the man for *that*, and all the rest will follow. However, we have already applied to the Probate Court, and warned the tenants not to pay their rents to Walcot, which they agree to with much alacrity. "Slow and sure" is our motto; but we're getting on,' concluded the lawyer, cheerfully.

'But who is to be answerable for the law expenses in the meantime?'

'Nobody; that is, anybody. Why, my good sir, you are the heir presumptive—nay, apparent—to 12,000*l.* a year.'

'I wish it was apparent,' sighed Gresham, ruefully. 'I wish I had even my 5,000*l.* down.'

'I can let you have that,' answered the lawyer, confidently, 'and on very easy terms. But, lor bless you, you won't need a tenth of it—that is for preliminary expenses.'

'I don't want to touch it; I only want the interest of it.'

'Oh, well; there will be no sort of difficulty about that. In any case—since we have stopped the sale of the land—your legacy is safe enough, and you may make certain of your little income.'

'Thank Heaven!' ejaculated Gresham.

'For a small mercy, my dear sir,' put in the lawyer, smiling, 'considering the fortune which I hope will be yours at no very distant date. If this Walcot had got rid of the estates, and no embargo had been laid upon his doing so, why then, indeed, we should have had a stiffish battle to fight; but as it is, though we have only taken the first step, I already see daylight—you look now as if you saw it yourself.'

'Yes, I do—sunshine;' and in truth the young fellow's handsome face was aglow with pleasure.

'Dear me, how quickly you change about!' observed the lawyer, to whom Gresham had become much more interesting since he beheld in him the probable heir of Halcombe. 'I

wouldn't do anything rash, you know, if I were you, notwithstanding things look brighter. I'd keep on getting up in the morning, for example, in accordance with the terms of your legacy.'

'I'll be Prudence itself,' said Gresham. 'In the meantime could you raise me 100*l.* on my expectations?'

'Certainly. I'll write you a cheque this moment; though I assure you, as to legal expenses, there is at present not the least necessity——'

'My good sir, I was not thinking of any legal expenses beyond a licence at Doctors' Commons,' said Gresham, laughing; 'I am going to get married.'

'Oh, I see!' said Mr. Sturt, apologetically; 'since you said "Prudence itself," I did not think of that contingency.'

Gresham thought Mr. Sturt the most charming of lawyers, a tribe he had hitherto suspected of raising objections and putting difficulties in the path of pleasure; but he little knew that that gentleman had been instructed

beforehand by his employer to portray his (Gresham's) future prospects in rose-colour, and especially to furnish him with any funds for which he might have occasion.

Mr. Mayne partly shared the attorney's sanguine views as to the eventual recovery of the estate; but, had he not done so, would have taken the same course, to accelerate the happiness of his friend. His own marriage with Milly was not to take place so quickly as he desired—Lady Arden having insisted on a 'decent interval' between those nuptials and the family bereavement; but he did not grudge Gresham his better fortune. Nevertheless when the party from the Hall came up to town, ostensibly for a 'change of scene,' and also to procure Elise her *trousseau*, it is probable there was an intention of making a similar provision for Millicent. It so happened, too, that for the first time in his life, since as an undergraduate he had rowed in the University Race at Putney, the Rev. John Dyneley came up to town, no doubt on urgent private affairs, since what par-

ticular business called him thither was never demonstrated.

And the effect of this was that at the private hotel 'off' Piccadilly, where they took up their quarters, there probably never was a family—in mourning—the younger members of which were in such brilliant condition and tearing spirits, or who had three such devoted cavaliers to attend upon them.

The 'Glamorgan' itself, as the hotel was called, was in a dim and melancholy street of severe fashion (it had been patronised of old by Lady Arden in her days of *ton*), and its 'services of solid silver,' sepulchral waiters, and a sort of ancestral fustiness which pervaded it, would have depressed any less elastic guests. But this sombre and sublime *régime* was so utterly set at nought by the new comers, that Master Frank played at hide and seek with the chambermaids, and the Great Baba held dramatic performances—Punch and Judy entertainments, and the Marionettes—in the private sitting-room. These little people, too, uncon-

sciously found their uses. When they were not 'playing old gooseberry' in the way of frolic and mischief, they acted as 'gooseberry pickers,' and did propriety in spite of themselves as companions to one or other of the three young couples; for Dyneley and Evelyn had somehow become almost as inseparable as Mayne and Millicent, or as Gresham and Elise—indeed, as nothing had been actually declared between them (and moreover Dyneley was a parson, which always gives a man 'a pull' in such cases), the first named couple had perhaps more opportunities of what Frank irreverently called 'spooning' than the others.

Gresham himself, though nearer to his bliss, had his little *tête-à-têtes* sadly interfered with by quite another sort of companionship—namely, interviews with his solicitor; for the probability of his becoming the proprietor of the Halcombe estates was growing every hour, and would perhaps have elated him, had he not had something still brighter to think about in his approaching marriage.

Elise, on the other hand, thought a good deal of his changed prospects, but by no means with exultation. Even to have won her lover in his comparative poverty had seemed to her too great good fortune; and now that he was about to inherit such undreamt-of wealth she could hardly believe that she was fated to share it. It seemed to this modest, though independent little Teuton, that George could have done so much better with himself, and almost that he ought to do so even now. She had not even ventured to write to her aunt at Hamburg of the prospects that were opening out for her, not because they might not after all be realised, but from her deep sense of their incongruity; they did not dazzle her own eyes—indeed, they were not fixed on them at all—but she understood the effect that they would have upon that relative, and, indeed, upon most people. In the household in which she had once filled so humble a part, and now played so important a one, she knew, however, no jealousies were entertained against her. If Lady Arden still nourished any

disappointment respecting what might have been between her elder daughter and Gresham, she did so in secret; no change in her manner—save that it was kinder and more familiar—betrayed any sore feeling with respect to Elise's new position; George had a perfect right to choose for himself, and, though he might have looked higher, she acknowledged to herself that he had not chosen unworthily. There had been, indeed, a certain concealment in the matter, at which she might have justly taken umbrage; but the responsibility for that had lain with Gresham alone—Elise, as we know, had both condemned and protested against it—and he had confessed as much in the same breath with which he acknowledged his engagement.

Of the two sisters, it was said, by some who boasted of their acquaintanceship without having obtained any familiar knowledge of them, that they would not have taken Miss Hurt's social elevation so coolly had they not had their own lovers to think about; that being

so well satisfied in fact with their own position they had no mind to quarrel with the good fortune of their governess. But both Evelyn and Millicent were in truth by nature incapable of the envious feelings which were thus imputed to them; moreover, they loved Elise, for her own sake; her kindness, her love of duty, her devotion to the children, and the simplicity and humility of her disposition, were qualities they knew how to appreciate. Nor was it the least of her credentials that she was honoured with the approbation and estimation of the Great Baba. He always termed her 'My Elise,' and had burst into tears upon being informed that arrangements were pending under which she would be no longer his exclusive property, but another's. In the meantime, however, she devoted herself to him as much as possible; and, when Gresham was closeted with Mr. Sturt, would often take him for a stroll among the shops, in the contents of which he took so absorbing an interest that his little nose stood in some danger of becoming tabular—through

being so constantly flattened against the windows.

On one of these excursions a very singular circumstance took place, which neither Elise nor her small companion are ever likely to forget to their dying day, albeit (like the windows) it only made a transient impression on the latter at the time, and hardly seemed worth speaking about. Elise, too, did not speak about it at the moment, and, it being remarked that she came home looking very pale and haggard, was promptly sent to lie down for an hour or so by Lady Arden; an order she obeyed with a sense of immense relief and gratitude. 'She has half tired herself to death, lugging about that monstrous Baba,' was her ladyship's reflection, 'and George will never forgive us, if he finds it out.'

In the meantime the supposed cause of her ill looks was regaled with chocolate creams (which he loved not wisely but too well, for they made him fatter than ever) and a review of his soldiery. The circumstance of slaying a

staff officer on horseback with a pea from his cannon awakened a certain association in his Highness's mind.

'Do's oo know,' observed he to his aide-de-camp (Frank), 'that dear papa was never put in the pit-hole after all?'

'Hus—h, dear, hush,' whispered Frank, gently. 'Baba mustn't talk about such sad things.'

'But he wasn't, I tell you,' persisted this terrible child. 'He must have got out of the feather coach when Diney (Dyneley) wasn't looking, and then they popped in somebody else.'

'What is the dear child saying?' inquired Lady Arden, looking up from her desk; 'it never does to contradict him, you know, Frank.'

'Let *me* take him,' said Evelyn, rising quickly, and transferring the child to her own lap. 'Let us shoot the French, and not tell stories.'

'Baba never tells stories,' observed that potentate, with irritation. 'I saw papa in the street, and wanted to run to him. But Elise

said "No," "Mein gott, no!" she said, and was very fitened.'

Fortunately Lady Arden had resumed her occupation, and did not hear this; but Franky's eyes were growing enormously large, and he murmured softly, 'Was it his ghost, Evy?'

'Hush, hush, dear; there must have been a resemblance to dear papa in some other person which deceived the child, of course. If Baba will come to Evy's room, she has got a macaroon for him.'

In this prospect all ideas of the other world were at once lost to his Highness, and he toddled off in an ecstacy.

An hour later Gresham came in, and was informed that Elise did not feel equal to coming down to dinner—had thoroughly overdone herself, in fact. She had written a little note to him which Evelyn slipped into his hand.

'Come with Evy,' it said, 'when you can get away without exciting remark; I want to speak to you.'

There was a little boudoir chiefly for the

ladies' use, too small to be called a drawing-room, to which Evelyn presently conducted him, and where he found Elise, still very pale, and quite unlike herself.

'Good Heavens! what is the matter, darling?'

'Don't ask her many questions,' said Evelyn. 'She will tell what she can; but, the fact is, her system has received a shock. I will tell you what has happened—or what she thinks has happened—and then you may ask her about it.'

Elise nodded, and smiled feebly.

'She has not been run over!' ejaculated Gresham.

'No no: how like a man that is! There is nothing physically the matter with her, George: but her nerves are gone. Now listen. When you parted with her, at Mr. Sturt's, she took the child to Covent Garden to see the flowers. They were in the covered walk there looking at some bouquets, when Elise saw some grapes, and asked Baba whether he would like a bunch. He said "Yes," of course, and the woman was

cutting one for him when he cried out, "Look, look, there's papa!" Elise looked round and saw a figure, very like dear papa's, only more bowed in the shoulders, going slowly down the arcade. She was herself struck by the resemblance, but replied, "No, no, dear, your papa is dead and buried you know; that is only some one like him." But Baba pulled at her gown, and taking no notice of the grapes—which was certainly remarkable——'

'A miracle,' put in Gresham, smiling; 'I am prepared to believe anything after that.'

'Don't jest, George,' said Evelyn, gravely; 'for in poor Elise's eyes the thing is most serious.'

'It is as true as I sit here,' murmured Elise.

'*What* is true?' exclaimed Gresham. 'As I understand Baba saw the back of somebody that reminded him of my uncle.'

'Yes; but they followed this man,' continued Evelyn, 'and just as he reached the door of an hotel, he turned round, face to face

with them—so Elise says—and then they both recognised him. Baba wanted to follow him into the hotel; but Elise was so shocked and frightened that she called a cab, and came home, where she arrived more dead than alive herself.'

'The poor dear must have overworked herself, and been in want of food,' suggested Gresham.

Elise herself sat with her eyes closed—in appearance, as Evelyn had said, 'half dead'—so that he unconsciously spoke of her like a doctor discussing his patient with her nurse.

'No; she had a very tolerable lunch, and declares she was not at all tired. She was not thinking of dear papa until the child spoke of him, and felt in excellent health and spirits.'

Gresham perceived that the case was serious; but not unnaturally thought that ridicule was the best cure for such an hallucination.

'I really think that we have had enough rubbish in connection with my poor uncle and

the other world already,' he said. 'It is so unlike Elise's good sense.'

'Of course it is,' said Evelyn; 'but that only makes the affair more remarkable: moreover there is Baba's testimony, given, I am bound to say, with all the seriousness of a bench of judges.'

'My *dear* Evelyn, what a witness! a child of four years old!'

'I saw your uncle,' murmured Elise, looking slowly up, 'as plainly as I see you. He was whiter and older looking than at Halcombe, but it was the same face.'

'Then of course he recognised you, my darling,' said Gresham, smiling.

'I am not sure: I think so,' she answered, simply. 'He seemed to look mournfully upon me, and also deprecatingly. I have been thinking about that.'

'The fact is, George,' put in Evelyn—'though I am sure Elise has nothing to reproach herself with, since it is ourselves rather than Elise, if any one, who is to blame—it struck her

that he was lamenting how soon he had been forgotten. Lost in our own selfish pleasures, we have not been so mindful perhaps as we might have been of the loss of poor papa.'

'I don't acknowledge that,' answered Gresham. 'That is a mere morbid view.'

'So Elise has persuaded herself; but what she has got into her mind, and which I cannot argue her out of,' said Evelyn, with a faint blush, 'is that papa is displeased with her for having won your affections; since he had other plans for you.'

'Exactly,' answered Gresham, coolly: 'that explains half the mystery. Elise had her mind already prepared for this visitation.—However, my darling,' he continued more gently, 'this affair shall be thoroughly inquired into. I promise you that this ghost shall be exorcised; fortunately, we have a clergyman on hand to do it. I will go down with Dyneley to Covent Garden this very evening. Do you happen to remember the name of the hotel?'

'Yes, dear,' replied Elise, and this time in

less depressed tones. It was evidently a relief to her that the matter was to be seriously investigated. 'I saw it written up on the coffee-room blinds. It was the "Old Hummums."'

'Very good. No doubt the matter will admit of explanation. In the meantime pray take a reasonable view of it.'

He stooped down and kissed her tenderly; as if to make amends for his assumed severity.

'You never heard of the Old Hummums before, I suppose, by the bye?' he asked.

'I? No, love. But it seems to me now that I shall never forget the name.'

As he left the room, Evelyn asked him why he had put that last question.

'Well; the fact is, I thought the poor dear had seen her apparition in a spot she knew was connected with my uncle by association. When in London he always used to put up at the 'Old Hummums—which is certainly rather curious.'

CHAPTER XIII.

AT THE OLD HUMMUMS.

IMMEDIATELY after the ladies had left the dinner-table, Gresham told the strange story of Elise's adventure to Mayne and Dyneley. Neither of them were disposed to be jocular on such a subject, though perhaps for different reasons.

'I am afraid Miss Hurt has been taking too much out of herself of late,' observed the former. 'Our life in London is a great change from the quiet routine of Halcombe. As for the ghost—I confess I don't believe in ghosts within the Metropolitan district.'

'Still, for her own sake the matter should be investigated,' said Dyneley.

Mayne shrugged his shoulders. 'It seems to me to be a case of nerves. To treat such an

hallucination seriously would be to give it a substantial form, which is the very thing to be avoided. Besides, you can't go to the Hummums, and inquire of the head-waiter whether a gentleman's ghost happened to be just now on the premises. Don't you think—with Miss Spence's experience so fresh in our minds—that we have had almost enough of ghosts?'

'That is the very observation I made myself,' observed Gresham, thoughtfully. 'Of course the whole affair is absurd, but I am bound to say that Elise is not one of the hysterical sort.—Will you come with me to the Hummums, Dyneley? We shall probably see some old gentleman who bears a strong resemblance to my poor uncle, when the matter will be explained at once. We need not be half an hour away, and Mayne can tell the ladies we have gone to smoke a cigar.'

'I will go with you, of course,' said Dyneley. 'I think, with you, that the matter should at

once be cleared up for Miss Hurt's sake. Evelyn would never think so seriously about it unless there was something in it.'

At this Mayne chuckled, and muttered something about female influence, which brought the colour into the cheeks of both of them; and as they went downstairs, 'My best compliments to the ghost' were his last words to them over the banisters.

It was certainly a somewhat ridiculous expedition. Their cab took them to Covent Garden somewhat quicker than Gresham wished, for he had not made up his mind how to proceed when they arrived at their destination.

'I suppose we had better ask to see the Visitors' List,' suggested his companion, as they paused before the door of the hotel.

'All right, old fellow—only they won't show it us, even if they have one.'

Indeed the waiter informed them that 'parties' only left their names when they were going away. If the two gentlemen were in

search of any particular 'party,' he could no doubt, however, give them the information desired.

Now the waiter was young, and, as Gresham thought, might be new to the place, and never have heard of his uncle; otherwise, since the Baronet's death must surely be known to the hotel household, he could hardly have brought himself to make his next inquiry: 'Is Sir Robert Arden staying in the house?'

'Sir Robert Arden? Yes, sir: came last night from Liverpool. Sitting-room No. 4, first floor.'

The two men interchanged looks of amazement.

'If you know the gentleman very well,' said the waiter, perceiving their embarrassment, 'I will take up your names; but if not—he has just dined, and——'

'Take this card up: I am his nephew,' said Gresham. 'We must see this out, Dyneley,' he added in a whisper. 'The man has taken a name that doesn't belong to him. I should not

be astonished if we found Walcot at the bottom of this.'

'But the likeness?' gasped the Curate.

'True; I had forgotten that,' answered his companion as they followed the waiter up the stairs. 'This is tremendous. I would give fifty pounds if we had Bevill here.'

The waiter knocked at the sitting-room door, went in with the card, and after a slight delay came out again. 'Walk in, gentlemen,' he said.

Gresham entered first; and Dyneley, following, was careful to close the door behind them.

A tall figure, with a cigarette in his mouth, rose from the sofa to receive them; an older and thinner figure than when they had seen it last, and with a face inexpressibly weary and dejected, but the face and figure of Sir Robert Arden, and of no other.

'So you have found me out already, George?' were his first words, and he held out a wasted hand.

'Is it possible that I see you alive, uncle?' exclaimed Gresham. 'Dyneley, are we dreaming?'

'Yes, I am alive,' returned the old man, wearily; 'though it would be better for me, and for you, if it were otherwise. I trust all are well at Halcombe?'

Gresham nodded assent: he could not find voice to speak. Astounding as it was to behold this man, apparently risen from the dead, it was still stranger to hear him talk in this indifferent strain; his tone indeed was melancholy and depressed to an extreme degree, and his face wandered from one to the other with pitiful and appealing looks, but the wonder was that his own position did not seem to appear to him as in any way abnormal or inexplicable.

'You gaze at me with wonder,' continued Sir Robert, 'as well you may, but you have no reproaches to heap upon me. And yet I have behaved ill to both of you. You are a clergyman, Dyneley; what must you think of one who has left those he loved without a word, and

sown distress and pain broadcast among them, at the bidding of a scoundrel?'

'We know you have been deceived, sir,' said the Curate, gently.

'Deceived? Yes; I have been deceived,' answered the other with a sigh that bespoke as much bitterness as regret. 'It was cruel, it was vile in him. But, oh, that I could think it was *all* deceit! Can Lucifer, think you, Mr. Dyneley, have angels under him—blessed spirits that obey his wicked will?'

'No, sir,' answered the Curate, gravely. 'He may pretend to have such, being a liar and the father of lies, but it cannot be so.'

Sir Robert shook his head, and sighed even more deeply than before. 'You do not know what I know, you have not seen what I have seen,' he said.

'We *do* know, we *have* seen,' answered the Curate, 'if, as I judge, you are referring to certain manifestations, professing to be spiritual, and in connection with one very dear to you who has passed away.'

'What do you mean?' inquired the Baronet, eagerly. 'Is it possible that my sainted Madeline—— George, Dyneley, what have you got to tell me?'

'Nothing, sir, but what mere mortals can tell,' continued the Curate, solemnly. 'We pretend to no cognisance of matters that have been hidden from the eyes of man since God created him. We make no claim to pry into matters beyond the grave. But by great good fortune we have found out a villain who has made use of such pretensions. His name is —Ferdinand Walcot.'

'Oh, Heavens, her own brother! It is impossible!'

'We have seen the woman, Sir Robert, who, at his instigation, personated your dead wife.'

'The woman who personated *my Madeline!*'

'Yes, sir. The voice you heard was *her* voice, the face you saw was *her* face. It was Annabel Spence—the cast-off mistress of your

brother-in-law. She shall confess it to you, if need be, with her own lips.'

Sir Robert put up his hand with a gesture of abhorrence. 'Blasphemous and accursed deceiver!' he muttered; 'how dared she do it?'

'It was not her doing, Sir Robert,' answered the Curate, firmly. 'She was merely the instrument of another: your poor wife was nothing to *her*; but in this Walcot—"her own brother," as you have just said—it was infamous, blasphemous, or what you will. You took a serpent to your bosom, and he stung you.'

Sir Robert held up his hand in a deprecating manner.

'Have you not even yet, sir, the courage to cast him from you?' continued Gresham. 'You have forgiven him already, it seems; it is well. But you still owe a duty to others—to those whom you yourself say you have wronged; I am not one of them, and therefore I may speak——'

'Mercy, mercy!' cried Sir Robert, clasping

his thin hands together. 'Give me time, man. You don't know what you ask. Can I pluck out my own heart-strings?'

'Is it possible, then,' pursued the Curate, 'that in spite of all that has happened you still cling to this miscreant? There must surely be some misunderstanding in your own mind.'

'No, no: I perceive that he has deceived me. I have known it long ago: when he left me at Marseilles to cross the world alone.'

'Then you did not return to England with him?' put in Gresham, whom a certain awful question constantly recurring within him had hitherto made silent. 'If this is indeed my uncle,' it ran, 'who then was the man I saw lying dead at Salton Point, and whom we buried at Halcombe?'

'I? No. He left the ship and me that night, and I went to Australia all alone. We had had no quarrel; but there were some matters —they had reference to yourself, George—on which we had differed of late. I had already begun to repent, too, of having alienated myself

from my family, and he had remonstrated strongly against what he called my weakness in that respect.'

'He felt, in fact, that his influence over you was losing its power?' suggested Dyneley.

'Yes: that was no doubt the cause of his deserting me so suddenly. I did not think so at the time; but during that long and lonely voyage I had plenty of time for thought, and my eyes were opened upon many things. Among others I perceived clearly how harshly, cruelly, and ungratefully I had been induced to behave to those who had been so dear to me at Halcombe. As to Lady Arden, the shame that consumed me upon her account was such that, though an opportunity twice offered itself in vessels we spoke with, I had not the courage to communicate with her by letter. Before the ship reached Australia, however, I had resolved to make a clean breast of it, and would have done so on the instant, but that the telegraph to England was out of order.'

Here Dyneley and Gresham interchanged a

significant glance. It was the news, then, of the telegraphic communication having been re-established between the two countries that had so alarmed Walcot during his interview with Mr. Raynes, and which had caused him instantly to fly to Sweden.

'What I suffered,' continued Sir Robert, 'on finding myself cut off, as it were, from my repentance by this circumstance, no tongue can tell. The strange country, the new scenes, were lost upon me; I was consumed with an insatiable desire to make my peace with all of you; and it monopolised me wholly. I took passage home by the first ship—ah, what a voyage it was! I mixed with none of the passengers; I was a recluse feeding on my own miserable thoughts and memories. I grudged every hour of our tardy course till we came in sight of England: and then—then fear and shame took possession of me. I came up here, last night, yet dared not make my presence known to any of you. What might not have happened, during my long absence, to those

I had deserted; what change might not have taken place in their own feelings towards me!'

'There has been no change, my dear uncle, so far as their affection for you is concerned,' interposed Gresham, gently. 'There have been other changes, however, of which, it seems, you do not know anything.'

'But you told me all were well. Oh, Heavens! what has happened?'

'Nothing has happened, sir, thank Heaven, to either Lady Arden or the children; they are even now in London.'

'So near!' exclaimed Sir Robert, with a start of joy. 'And yet,' he added, with a sigh, 'they may be no longer near in the sense of dearness. It is impossible but that my conduct must have estranged them.'

'It has not estranged them, sir. You will find a genuine and loving welcome from them; but——'

'But what, George?' inquired Sir Robert, impatiently. 'What care I what has happened,

if they are alive and well, and have forgiven me?'

'The fact is,' said Dyneley, 'events have taken place which exhibit Ferdinand Walcot in the blackest colours. I have laid before you the deception practised on yourself—which you apparently admit as fact; and yet—or so it seems to Gresham and myself—you still entertain towards him a certain misplaced kindliness, which awakens doubt—suspicion—of your own strength of purpose. Should this unhappy prejudice in his favour be made apparent to Lady Arden, reconciliation with her would in my opinion be rendered impossible. I must add, in my opinion, justly so.'

'In *my* opinion,' added Gresham, bluntly, 'the man is only fit to be hung.'

Sir Robert turned from one to the other with a pained look. 'I had not expected this,' he said. 'I had fondly hoped you would have spared me. It is impossible indeed that you should understand what my unhappy brother-in-law has been—nay, I confess *is*—to me. If I

say he has been in my eyes a link between heaven and earth, to you it must needs savour of exaggeration. Yet "sacred is the flesh and blood to which we link a faith divine." You will retort, "But he has deceived you." To some extent he may have done so; and indeed I know he has. But who shall separate the false from the true in such unsearchable things? Let it suffice that I believe what you have told me: that this man and I have parted for ever in this world. His name shall never cross my lips; but, on the other hand, let me not hear it associated with evil doing. The fear that it would be otherwise has—I confess it—lain at the bottom of my hesitation to communicate with Lady Arden.'

'But you do not know what the man has done, sir,' urged Gresham, firmly.

'Nor do I want to know. Let him be dead to me and mine henceforth. To those whom he has wronged, through me, I am prepared to make every reparation in my power—though it includes my own humiliation and self-abasement.

But of what he has done amiss to myself, let me be the judge. What matters it to you, or any one, if I acquit him? For days, and weeks, and months, of late, he has been as it were arraigned at the bar of my own conscience. His case has been pleaded, both for and against, before me. He has been convicted of many things. I have heard, it is true, from your lips a still more damning charge than any heretofore brought against him, but I had already conceived of such an accusation; it does not take me by surprise, although it pains me beyond measure: and I have no doubt that you can prove it. Nevertheless, so far as I am concerned—and it is I who am mainly concerned—I acquit—no, I cannot acquit—but I forgive him. All confidence between him and me is over and gone; but I nourish no ill-will against him. I set the white against the black; the benefits he has conferred on me against the injuries he has committed against me; and I cry quits.'

'In other words, Sir Robert,' observed Dyneley, firmly, 'you prefer to persist in your

infatuation. Are we to understand that you wish to remain ignorant of recent events; that you resolutely close your ears against the evidence we have to offer you of this man's treachery, fraud, and greed?'

'Yes; I do,' answered the other, curtly. 'I do not wish to hear.' He rose from his chair, and paced the room with hasty strides. 'Stay: there is one thing to state, in justice to Ferdinand Walcot, before leaving this painful topic, I trust for ever. He may have been treacherous, indeed I grant it; he may even in a sense have been fraudulent; though, as the treachery and the fraud concerned myself alone, it is for me, not for you, to judge him: but you err when you accuse him of greed. Through all the years I have known him, and notwithstanding the influence he possessed over me, it was never used—yes, I may say "never"—to his own material advantage. I paid him a certain salary—a small one considering the services he did me in return—but that was all he ever received from me, though he well knew he

had only to ask and have, had it been thousands. He was masterful, and fond of power, but loyal and just in his vicarious exercise of it; his spirit was altogether free from those gross instincts of which you speak; it was marred and soiled, no doubt, though I once thought otherwise, but it was never polluted—else'—— Here Sir Robert paused: 'Gresham, Dyneley, there are some matters upon which I cannot speak—and I will not—even to you.'

'There is no need, sir,' answered the Curate, quietly. 'Upon the matters to which, as I conjecture, you refer, we will agree to differ and be silent. But may I remind you, since you say Mr. Walcot *never* sought his own advantage, that you once made a will in his favour?'

Sir Robert started. 'That is true,' he said. 'No doubt contingently; that is, in case of my demise——'

'One moment, sir; that will was dictated to you at Halcombe under certain circumstances,

and, since you are now aware of them, you can hardly deny at Mr. Walcot's instigation.'

Sir Robert's pale face flushed from brow to chin. 'I suppose it was so,' he said; 'indeed it must have been so. Well; that will is now waste paper.'

'Not altogether, Sir Robert; allow me.' Dyneley took up a decanter of wine from the table, and filled the Baronet's glass. 'When you have drunk that, I will tell you something.'

Sir Robert obeyed mechanically, his eyes fixed themselves inquiringly upon the Curate's face, as he emptied the glass, and set it down with trembling fingers.

'That will was proved in Doctors' Commons, and Ferdinand Walcot has gone off with the money.'

Sir Robert sank into his own chair, and gazed on the speaker with wild amazement.

'*That* will—*my* will—was proved! What, as though I were a dead man——'

'You *were* dead in the eyes of the law, and of the world. Your dead body—or what was

supposed to be so—was brought over from Salton Point by Ferdinand Walcot, and buried in Halcombe churchyard. I read the service over it myself.'

CHAPTER XIV.

POOR DYNELEY.

When the new History of Credulity, Imposture, and Superstition comes to be compiled, it will have to be recorded of the dupes of Spiritualism that for the most part they were not unconscious that those who professed themselves to be links between this world and that beyond the grave made money from the exhibition of that faculty; that being possessed of certain spiritual attributes, unspeakably tender and ethereal, they turned them into hard cash; that having established relations, such as have been yearned for in vain for a hundred generations of man, with denizens of the unseen world, they took commissions for introducing them to less favoured fellow-creatures. A faith that sur-

vived this, one would think, ought to have moved mountains, instead of leaving everything —geographically or otherwise—exactly where it found it. The explanation, of course, lies in the gross view which the dupes themselves take of spiritual matters, which prevents them from observing the anomaly, far less the irreverence, of the frauds of which they are the victims.

With Sir Robert Arden this was not so; he had been fooled to the top of his bent, and even when he had suspected duplicity, had stuck to his colours; the memories of his intercourse with Ferdinand Walcot were so dear, and mingled with such unutterable mysteries, that they had survived the knowledge of his deceit and ill-behaviour. There seemed to him something of the priest's office—nay, of the priest's attributes — about Ferdinand Walcot still, though he had, as it were, poisoned the sacramental elements.

But when it was once made clear that the man had been actuated by mere greed, then in the long hoodwinked, but pure, eyes of his

victim he fell to pieces at once like some rotten thing. The means which he had taken to accomplish his villany—stupendous as they were in their ingenuity—were lost, in the Baronet's view, in the villany itself. That terrible revelation of the Curate, 'Your body was buried in Halcombe churchyard, and I myself read the service over it,' went home to Sir Robert Arden like a cannon-ball; he fell back in his chair under them, as though he had indeed been dead; but his first words were not of amazement, but of self-abasement and contrition.

'I have been fooled,' he said, 'and fooled into evil-doing, from first to last.'

To hear him say so, with his grey hair bowed before them, and his hands clasped in mute appeal to their pity, went to the very hearts of his hearers.

So forlorn and melancholy was his condition that it was arranged that Gresham should take up his quarters at the hotel for the night, while Dyneley went back to the ladies to ex-

plain matters as best he could. This was not an easy task, nor one that could be procrastinated, since that 'little stroll to smoke a cigar' which Mayne had given as a reason for the young men's absence had extended to some hours, and excited an anxiety it was necessary to appease. Let it suffice to say that the Curate accomplished his mission without the interruption of hysterics. Lady Arden wept; but the tears she shed where those of silent joy. It was curious that the thought of doing away with all misunderstanding between herself and Sir Robert seemed to afford her a satisfaction almost equal to the knowledge of his existence.

'Thank Heaven, that villain can never again come between my husband and me!' she said.

Although, too, the absorbing topic for them all was the almost miraculous reappearance of Sir Robert upon the stage of life, there were other matters demanding discussion of a scarcely less amazing kind.

At midnight a note was brought in to Lady Arden in Sir Robert's handwriting. She kissed

it reverently, and, when she had read it, turned to Elise Hurt.

'My dear husband,' she said, with a tear and a smile, 'has sent you a message, Elise; he is as bent upon conferring happiness on others, as he ever was. He bids me tell you that his "inopportune appearance," as he terms it, is not to delay by a single hour your union with his nephew.'

'That is so like dear papa,' cried Evelyn; 'no one save himself could at such a time have been so thoughtful, even for those they love.'

Elise said nothing; her heart was too full for speech; but she raised Lady Arden's fingers to her lips, and kissed them. Not an eye of those present was dry, nor closed that night in slumber. The events that had occurred, and the marvels incidentally disclosed—or rather half disclosed—begot in all too overwhelming an excitement. The ladies, however, were persuaded to retire to their rooms, leaving Mayne and Dyneley alone together.

'By Jove!' exclaimed the former, giving for the first time a natural expression to his feelings, 'this is a *most tremendous* business, eh?'

'Not even your eloquence, Mayne, can exaggerate or enhance its importance,' answered the Curate, drily.

'But the ladies don't seem quite to see it,' urged the other. 'They perceive, of course, that a miracle has happened in this turning-up of Sir Robert; but that's nothing to what we now know has gone before it; not to mention what is to come after it: I mean its consequences. Instead of Gresham having 12,000*l.* per year—for one thing—he will now only have what his uncle chooses to allow him. For the estates, of course, will revert at once to their former owner.'

'There will, no doubt, be great changes,' replied Dyneley, slowly; his voice was grave, and even sad; but the other was too full of excitement to notice it.

'Yes; and there *have* been, begad, too. Who *was* it that got exchanged for Sir Robert, think

you; died at Salton Point in place of him, and has been trespassing all this time in the family vault at Halcombe? It doesn't seem to strike you as being anything very remarkable to bury the wrong man—I suppose clergymen are used to it.'

'My dear Mayne, it is not only remarkable, but astounding. I am lost in wonder at the network of intrigue and villany in which this fellow Walcot enmeshed us; but so far as the dead man is concerned, there seems to have been no crime involved beyond that of duplicity. One person was merely substituted for another; the man, whoever he was, came to his end by natural means; there was no foul play.'

'My dear Dyneley, for a divine of the Church of England you are really the very coolest hand; one dying person was "merely" substituted for another, you say. But I suppose he had some hand in the substitution himself. He didn't die at Salton Point instead of somebody else to *please* Walcot, I suppose, however persuasive that gentleman's manners

may have been. Moreover, even if he did, it strikes a mere layman as rather a ghastly sort of thing for a fellow-creature to do—this sailing under false colours to the very brink of the grave.'

'It was very wrong and horrible altogether,' assented the Curate, in a mechanical tone. 'But the mystery will be explained, no doubt, one day.'

'One would really think, by your way of speaking about it,' replied Mayne, 'that you had got hold of one end of the mystery already; it seems, however, to have escaped your recollection that Gresham himself went down to Salton Point, and *saw* his uncle after death, when, as a matter of fact, Sir Robert was on his way to Australia. The subject of miracles may pall, and fail to interest, in your reverence's case through familiarity; but this little incident, I confess, strikes me as the most noteworthy of all.'

'Nay, it only proves that Gresham was deceived in the identity of the man in death, as we were in his burial. The difference between

two dead old men is by no means so marked as between two living ones; and from what I know of Gresham's character—though he is as brave as a lion—he would shrink from such a spectacle rather than narrowly investigate it. Bevill, if you remember, never saw the body.'

'True, true!' exclaimed Mayne, beginning to pace the room, as his custom was when greatly excited. 'I wish Bevill were here now; though at the same time I would not deprive him of a certain person's company for an instant. My dear Dyneley, you have set all my blood boiling. You think I am a happy man, no doubt?'

'You ought to be,' answered Dyneley, sighing.

'Ought, yes; but "ought" stands for nothing. I shall never be comfortable, nor quiet, until I have performed my mission in life. Do you know that *that man* has got clear away to Sweden with something like 60,000*l.*! Whatever doubts you may have had on the matter—for you did doubt; it is a peculiarity of you parsons to doubt, when everybody else

is certain, and *vice versâ*—it is now proved that Ferdinand Walcot has robbed Sir Robert of 3000*l.* a year for ever.'

'He will not enjoy it,' observed the Curate, calmly.

'Well; let us hope not—for ever; at present, however, he appears to be doing so. Bevill writes me that the villain is living like a fighting-cock in Christiania. Whenever I think of that, you can't imagine how like a fighting-cock I feel myself. I wish I had your philosophic calm, old fellow. I positively feel too savage to go to bed. I shall try the morning air, and another cigar.' And he went out.

He was mistaken in attributing to his late companion a philosophic calm, though the Curate did his best to be resigned and patient. The shadow of a bitter disappointment had projected itself upon his spirit, and in that night of wonders had rendered him indifferent and unsympathetic in his friend's view. By the return of Sir Robert all the old obstacles to the Curate's marriage with Evelyn had suddenly

sprung up anew. At her own implied request he had, as we have seen, put off, out of respect for the Baronet's memory, a direct application for her hand, and how could he make it now, when she was no longer comparatively dowerless, but had become, as before, the possible recipient of great possessions? Nay, although Sir Robert, it seemed, had given his consent to the union of Gresham and Elise, it was by no means likely that his nephew, having made so unwished-for a choice, would now be made Sir Robert's heir. The broad lands of Halcombe were more likely to be left to his wife's family, and especially to his favourite niece, than ever. John Dyneley was too good a man to regret that the house to which he was so closely attached by bonds of friendship had regained its head and its protector; but the circumstance, he felt, had dashed the cup of happiness from his own lips. If it is an ill wind that blows nobody good, it is equally true that that is a very favourable gale of Fortune, indeed, which wrecks the hopes of no man.

CHAPTER XV.

A MATRIMONIAL TEA-PARTY.

UNALLOYED, for the most part, as was the joy of his family at Sir Robert Arden's return, it was by no means free from embarrassment; to put the matter vulgarly, and as I am afraid it was actually put in the domestic regions of Halcombe Hall, 'What business had he ever had to have gone away, drat him?' (But this, it is fair to add, was before it was understood that the legacies left to each member of the household were not to be revoked.) Sir Robert himself was more deeply penetrated by the sentiment thus expressed than any one. He was, to say truth, thoroughly ashamed of himself. But being as sound at heart as a bell, however wanting in moral strength and mental

acuteness, he had not that fear of ridicule which in most persons under such circumstances would have been well nigh insupportable. His chief fear was lest his late ill-judged proceedings should have done any irremediable wrong to any one but himself; extreme sensitiveness prevented his ascertaining this by direct inquiry, but his eyes and ears were open while his tongue was dumb. Unfortunately, since it was understood that concerning a certain personage (who, nevertheless, occupied everybody's thoughts) a discreet silence was to be maintained, conversation for a time between himself and the family was difficult, and the wheels of domestic life were clogged and hampered. At the first meeting, and for the few days during which they remained in London, Mayne was wont to declare that the whole party were only saved from total collapse by the Great Baba, to whom Sir Robert's return was merely a gratifying incident—involving endless treats and presents—without anything anomalous or remarkable

about it. He considered 'dear papa' had played a very clever and amusing trick upon society in putting somebody else into the feather coach instead of himself, and then popping up again unexpectedly.

'*I* sord you first,' he said, as though it had been a game of Hide and Seek, in which he had been the fortunate discoverer. 'Elly (Elise) sord you second, after I cried "I spy."' All remembrance of Mr. Ferdinand Walcot had apparently vanished from his mind; until one day, fortunately not in Sir Robert's presence, he hazarded a hope, suggested by the pit picture in 'Joseph and his Brethren,' that it was Mr. Walcot who had been put into the pit-hole instead of papa.

'Let us trust so,' said Frankie, piously; whose spirits, to say truth, had been slightly dashed by 'dear papa's' return, lest it should involve that of hateful Uncle Ferdy.

In London, Sir Robert's resuscitation was only what is, by courtesy, termed a nine days' wonder—in the metropolis no wonder lasts in

reality half so long, but is overlapped by and gives place to another upon the principle of the 'dissolving views.' But at Halcombe a good deal was both said and thought about it, and for a very considerable period. An observation of Mr. Raynes upon the subject, accompanied by a most tremendous grin, was not only characteristic, but perhaps embodied the secret thoughts of a good many people.

'Well; I tell you what,' he said; 'things may be a little uncomfortable at the Hall, but they might easily have been a good deal worse. What with Gresham and the young ladies all choosing their sweethearts—which is a kind of game everybody likes to join in—it's a deuced good thing Lady Arden herself didn't get engaged to anybody.'

Perhaps the wisest course, as well as the kindest, which Sir Robert could have taken, was his insisting upon the marriage of Gresham and Elise taking place at Halcombe upon the date already fixed for it: for there is nothing like a wedding for monopolising one's neigh-

bours' thoughts and talk, and for dwarfing all other objects of interest. But for that, the exhumation of that interloping body in the family vault—with a view of course to its identification—would have caused not a little stir, and once more turned all minds to the topic which Sir Robert would fain have had them forget.

We may here say it was exhumed in vain; neither more nor less was found there, alas! than is to be discovered after the very best and noblest of us have mingled for a few weeks with the dust we came from. It only added another mystery to the romance that overhung the Hall, and set all mouths agape. But to a secluded neighbourhood like that of Halcombe, which had had no topic to talk about since the pedlar was frozen to death on the moor early in the century, such a superfluity of incident was overwhelming.

Their power of absorption was not equal to it: and just as the boa constrictor, who is made lively with a rabbit, is after a yoke of oxen

inclined for slumber, they became lethargic—gorged.

The marriage of George Gresham finished them; their glutted curiosity could only feebly grasp this last incident presented to their notice, and Sir Robert and his late proceedings henceforward scarcely occupied any space in their minds.

The Baronet himself almost forgot his own humiliation and self-reproaches in the happiness he had conferred upon his nephew; and indeed he had hit by instinct upon the best method of rehabilitating himself in his own eyes in other cases. For example, though her presence at the Hall must needs have been distressing to him, he insisted on Annabel Spence retaining her old position there; he had had enough, he said, of punishing the innocent in place of the guilty; it was but fitting that the remembrance of his transgressions should thus be kept alive within him; and, moreover, it was the only way that just now presented itself for keeping the penitent girl under the Curate's spiritual eye.

Dyneley himself was in higher favour with his patron than ever, and was admitted more than any one to his inmost confidence: which, greatly to his indignation, caused Mr. Mayne to confer upon him the title of Ferdinand the Second.

The wedding was a very quiet one, and beside Mr. Mayne there was but one marriage guest at Halcombe with whom we have any near concern. He was a friend of both bride and bridegroom, and was welcomed accordingly by the whole household; but with no one did he 'cotton' (as he himself expressed it) so closely as with Mr. Mayne. They were sailors both, and were consumed with a common passion for tobacco, which, however, the latter only smoked. Commodore Pearce (as he was always called at Halcombe, because it was understood he liked it) both smoked and chewed. That this little eccentricity was tolerated, even out of doors, by Lady Arden, was a proof alike of the Commodore's popularity with her, and of the improvement in what the doctors with

euphonious vagueness termed her nerve centres. The events that had taken place within her recent experience had had both morally and physically a favourable effect upon her; her ladyship had had in her time detractors of the baser sort who had asserted that 'what she wanted was a good shaking;' and this recipe, which had certainly been applied, had really achieved the best results. Like naughty children, who have been given 'something to cry for' which they have not desired, she had now learnt not to cry about nothing. A better wife than the present Lady Arden—though built upon very different lines from those of his 'sainted Madeline'—the Baronet could have hardly found; while as a mother there was no room for improvement in her.

On the day after the departure of the young couple, Sir Robert had a long talk with Dyneley, at the Manor Farm, of so confidential a nature that even the above fact was hinted at.

'I am more fortunate, my good fellow,' he said, 'than I ever knew myself to be, until now;

and happy far indeed beyond my deserts. How untrue in my case is the sad reflection of the poet :—

> Could the dead resume their life,
> That they would find in child and wife
> An iron welcome when they rise !

How different — though so undeservedly — have matters been with *me!* And then only look at Gresham :

> The hard heir strides about his lands,
> And will not yield them for a day,

has no application to him, I'm sure. One would think he had gained twelve thousand a year by my reappearance on the stage of life, instead of having lost it. Of course I have made him a handsome allowance, but what is that compared with his prospects of a month ago?'

'Your nephew is incapable of a sordid thought,' replied the Curate, warmly, 'and is thoroughly deserving of your liberality.'

'I am sure of it; it is fortunate indeed

that I have such a noble nature to deal with—I could not endure to think that my coming back was a source of disappointment to anybody.'

'I am sure you could not,' answered the Curate.

'Everybody has behaved in the most frank and generous way to me,' continued Sir Robert, 'with one exception.'

'I am sorry to hear there is even one,' replied Dyneley.

'I am sorry too, especially as this has happened in a quarter where I looked for better things. Of course I make allowances for the peculiar circumstances of the case; my unexpected return has put everything so topsy-turvy that I sometimes feel I ought to have never come back at all; moreover, I had so mismanaged matters of late' (here the colour came into Sir Robert's face) 'that there is no wonder people have lost confidence in me; still I did hope that I should have been given credit by the person I have in my mind for good feeling, if not for some generosity of spirit.'

'I have never heard any one deny you those qualities, Sir Robert; if he has done so, he is one who does not know you.'

'But this person knows me very well; and yet he has not only attributed to my nature an undue regard for wealth and position, but has supposed that recent events have taught me no lesson in that respect. When a man has been deceived on the one hand, and on the other has had his eyes opened to real worth and true nobility of character, as has happened to me, is it likely that he should still set store on things evanescent and accidental, and hold lightly such qualities as goodness, truth, self-sacrifice, and generosity?'

'I know no one, sir, who supposes that you hold them lightly,' answered the Curate, simply.

'Well, I *do*; it is the man who stands before me. How is it, if you have not so misjudged me, that you have never breathed a word to me of your love for Evelyn?'

'Ah, sir! I felt—I feared'——stammered the Curate.

'You felt I was an ass, and feared to prove it, Dyneley. Well; it was not paying me a compliment, but let that pass. You have been punished sufficiently by your own doubts of my sanity—for they were nothing less. When a man has been kept so long in the dark, as I have been, he does not see things so quickly as other people: if you wish to know who opened my eyes, it was Mrs. George Gresham. I asked her if there was anything I could do to complete her happiness, and she said, 'Yes: make Evelyn happy too.' There is a straightforwardness about that young woman I greatly admire: moreover, the Commodore has told me such things about her—when the ship was wrecked—as convince me that Gresham has won a woman worthy of him. And I can say the same, Dyneley, in your case, with respect to Evelyn.'

This matter-of-fact and taking-for-granted method of dealing with the Curate's passion saved that modest young fellow a world of embarrassment: but, even as it was, he did not

find it easy to express his sense of Sir Robert's kindness.

'Tut, tut; I am as pleased to give her to you,' said the Baronet, 'as you are to take her; only you must not take her *away*. Halcombe and I can't spare her: I am come over here this morning to see what can be done to the Manor Farm to make it suitable for a married parson—and at the same time, since I hate evictions, to keep on Gilbert Holm as a tenant. When you have overgrown it, you can have a wing at the Hall, and welcome.'

The Curate was in the seventh heaven of happiness, and therefore scarcely in the precise state of mind adapted for the consideration of building alterations: never was tenant so prompt to agree with every plan proposed by landlord.

'This is ridiculous, you know,' said Sir Robert: 'I have suggested three sorts of windows for the drawing-room, and you have said of each that "it couldn't be better." One *must* be better than the other, my good fellow.

I'll see Evelyn herself about it—you'll have to ask her, I suppose, when the wedding is to be?'

'Well, yes, sir; I suppose so.' The Curate was far from wishing to throw any obstacles in the way of the matter in question, and quite sympathised with Sir Robert's obvious desire that there should be as little delay as possible; but he felt he could scarcely fix a young lady's wedding day without putting the preliminary question to her, of 'Would she marry him?'

'Young people are so different from what they were in my time,' continued the Baronet, 'and take everything so precious coolly. Now, there's Mayne, for instance, a most capital fellow, no doubt, and who will make Milly an excellent husband. In his case there is plenty of money, and no sort of reason that I know of why he shouldn't marry her to-morrow: yet, when I hinted as much to him the other day, he hemmed and ha'd, and said, "Well, not *to-morrow*, Sir Robert; the fact is I have a visit to pay to an old friend abroad first." "Well,"

said I, quite out of patience with the fellow, "I hope it isn't a lady friend, at all events." And he assured me that it was not. You had better talk to him yourself, Dyneley, and find out when he does mean to marry Milly: and then you and Evy can be married the same day, you know.'

The Curate expressed his approval of this arrangement, and secretly resolved to carry the tardy Mr. Mayne on his shoulders, if it were necessary, to the brink of Matrimony, and then pitch him over.

CHAPTER XVI.

ON BOARD THE 'RUBY.'

THERE was this redeeming point even in Sir Robert's eyes in Mr. Mayne's desire to pay his Continental friend a visit before becoming a Benedict; namely, that he was obviously in a hurry to get that visit over. On the second day after Gresham's marriage, he left the Hall, accompanied by his new friend the Commodore, and with the full permission and approbation of the only person to whom he owed allegiance. Milly knew not whither he was bound, nor for how long; but she had not only confidence in his fidelity, but the conviction that it was no mere caprice that was depriving her of his presence. He had assured her of that much, and had besought her to forgive him for with-

holding a secret from her on the very threshold of their married life.

'On the other hand, I promise you, my darling,' he added, fondly, 'to have none such after marriage.'

There was no reason, so far as she was concerned, why Millicent should not have been told whither her lover was going; but it was absolutely necessary, for the present at least, to conceal it from Sir Robert; any reference to his brother-in-law was tacitly forbidden to every member of the family, nor would he have approved of any action, no matter with what object, that would have brought Ferdinand Walcot's name (and his own unhappy connection with it) into public notice. And the fact was, that the destination of Mr. Frederic Mayne was Christiania, and his object the playing out of that return match with his enemy which had so long been postponed *sine die.*

There were difficulties about it that most men would have pronounced insuperable, but of these Mayne thought but lightly; there were

objections to it, that in the eyes of men both wise and just might have been thought fatal, and it was for this reason that Mayne kept his own counsel in the matter. If his plan should fail, none but himself and the Commodore (who, in fact, had suggested the scheme) could be blamed for it, and only one person—the trusty Bevill—who had need be cognisant of their ill success. *Per contra*, if he succeeded, Mr. Ferdinand Walcot would have to return that 60,000*l.*, which he had annexed so cunningly, to its original possessor. The game was certainly worth the candle; and over and above the stakes—and what afforded even a greater attraction for the player—was the possibility of crying quits with one who had brought upon him personally an undeserved humiliation, who had committed a gigantic and successful fraud, and who doubtless considered himself too clever by half to fall within the scope of retribution.

On the second day after leaving Halcombe, Mayne set sail from Harwich in his own yacht,

under the command of Commodore Pearce, who was not unacquainted with high latitudes, nor for the first time had threaded the green islands that stud the quiet firth that leads up to Christiania. Mr. Mayne had business relations, as we know, with a certain house-timber merchant of that place, with whom he had kept up constant communications of late, and whom he had informed of his present expedition. Acting under his advice, Mr. Mayne himself forbore to gratify his traveller's curiosity by going on shore at all; but on his arrival at the port kept himself in strict seclusion on board his yacht, and explored Christiania by deputy in the person of his skipper. The Commodore himself did not show much energy in investigating the public buildings or other lions of the place; but took up his quarters at the Hôtel du Nord, and passed a considerable portion of his time in the reading-room thereof, where he fell in (not altogether by accident) with an English gentleman resident in the town, but who had himself only settled there of late

months. This personage, though of attractive appearance, good address, and of undeniably ample means, had his enemies among his fellow-countrymen in the town, who by their machinations and slanders (as he averred) had caused him to be looked upon with distrust, and prevented him from taking his proper position in local society. The cloud that overhung him was but temporary; the calumnies that had been disseminated against him were dying out, unable to confront the quiet dignity of his blameless life; but in the meantime he was denied admittance to the Athenæum, where the chief intellectual society of the place was to be met with, and where not only English works of reference were to be found, but the London newspapers were filed, an opportunity for perusing which to an exile like himself would have been very desirable. The freeborn citizen of the United States sympathised with this victim to the exclusive and prejudiced ideas of his fellow-countrymen, and offered him, by degrees, the right hand of

fellowship. It was impossible, of course, for him permanently to remedy his isolation, but such ameliorations of it as were in his power he placed at his service. Among other things, 'Would he do him the honour to dine with him on board the "Ruby"?'

Suspicion at once showed itself in Mr. Walcot's expressive features. He was not partial, he said, to being on board ship, even in harbour, and could enjoy his new friend's society on shore without trenching on his hospitality.

Then followed a few searching questions as to the yacht and its ownership, to which the Commodore replied with a frank audacity that went further, perhaps, with his new friend than the most earnest simplicity would have done. 'He was but the skipper of the vessel,' he said, 'which belonged to a rich young countryman (one Sir Charles Parker) of Mr. Walcot's; but, as a matter of fact, he had the sole control of her movements. Sir Charles was a minor, sent abroad by his guardian in the forlorn hope that

his health, weakened by excesses, would be rehabilitated by a sea voyage. Unhappily the young man could pursue his favourite vice as easily on board the "Ruby" as elsewhere; and the truth was, he was seldom or never sober. He had not even had the curiosity to set foot on shore since he had arrived at Christiania. He did nothing but booze in his cabin and read old newspapers, of which he had an extraordinary collection.'

'Do you mean that he files them?' inquired Mr. Walcot.

'Well, yes; I think he has the *Times* up to the last ten years; I reckon, however, he only reads the police cases. I can't say he is an agreeable cuss to meet at table; but if you would have come on board, we could have dined together very pleasantly and quite independent of him—he would rather have a bottle of brandy to himself than the best companion in the world.'

There the matter dropped for the time; but the fact was that this isolated Englishman

was interested in certain matters that had taken place in his own country since his departure from it, and had had no opportunity, or had missed it when it had offered itself, of reading any account of them. And after a day or two, during which the Commodore studiously avoided the topic of the yacht, his fish rose to this same fly.

'If your friend, Sir Charles, could be got out of his cabin for half-an-hour, Captain Yule' (for the Commodore had thought it wise to drop the use of a name which Walcot might have heard and remembered in connection with Gresham's shipwreck), I should feel really obliged if you *would* let me look at those old *Times* some day.'

'Sir Charles is never *in* his cabin after eight o'clock at night, but is snug in his berth, drunk. Why don't you come and see the papers, then?'

'To be sure; there is no reason why I should not,' mused Mr. Walcot. 'Let us say to-night, then.'

'To-day I dine with the American Consul,' answered the Commodore, quietly; 'but I am always aboard the craft by 7.30, lest I should be wanted to see poor Sir Charles. I'll call for you here at 7 to a minute, if that will suit your book.'

Whether Captain Yule did really have that engagement to dinner with the American Consul or not, he appeared at the Hôtel du Nord at the hour appointed, and in evening dress, having certainly paid a visit to his yacht in the meantime; and the two gentlemen started off together, arm in arm, for their destination. The yacht was anchored in the harbour; but one of her boats was waiting for them at the quay, into which they stepped, and were conveyed at once to the 'Ruby.' The yacht had borne another name before Sir Charles Parker had bought her, and Captain Yule had been appointed her skipper, so that no suspicion was evoked in the visitor's mind.

There was a moment's hesitation as he left the boat to set foot upon the deck of the vessel;

but he quelled it with an effort, and at once followed his host down the cabin stairs. The apartment had, as Captain Yule had promised, no other occupant but themselves; the fittings of it were handsome but plain, as becomes a sailor's drawing-room; and there was no smell of wine or spirits such as, under the circumstances, might have been anticipated. Moreover, there were a couple of well-lined bookcases, which a person of Sir Charles's unfortunate habits would scarcely have been expected to possess.

All this Walcot's quick eye took in at a glance; and it was with a somewhat uneasy air, though in a tone he contrived to render suitable to the occasion, that he inquired where, amid such order and neatness, the Baronet kept his old newspapers.

'In the billiard-room cupboard, at Halcombe,' replied the Commodore, coolly, with his back to the cabin door.

Walcot's hand dropped into the pocket of his shooting jacket.

'If you take that hand *out*, Ferdinand Walcot,' said the Commodore, at the same time covering him with a revolver, 'you are a dead man! I can shoot as quick and as true as any man in the States or out of them, and before you can bring that pistol of yours to bear on *me*, you will be in kingdom come. If you shoot me, you would be none the nearer to getting out of this; for a man stands on the other side of that cabin door who has come from England on purpose to renew his acquaintance with you, and who will not be baulked of it for a trifle.'

'And who the devil is he, or you, who dare to lift finger against me, or have any right to stop my coming or going?' inquired Walcot, fiercely.

'Well, as to the right, I am not sure; but as to the might, I'm certain,' answered the Commodore, coolly. 'You have done things yourself, as I hear, not altogether lawful; and, therefore, might make allowance for those who are driven to the same shifts. And as to who

it is that has taken upon him to take such strict charge of your respectable person, here he comes to answer for himself.'

The door opened and Mayne entered, closing the door carefully behind him.

At the sight of him, Walcot's keen face grew so black, that the Commodore pointed significantly to his revolver.

'It is no use,' he said; 'we are too many for you even here; and at the top of the companion stairs there are two sentries, who have orders to cut you down if you ever attempt to pass them. So 'cute a cuss as I take you to be should know when he is beaten. Come, give up that pistol.'

Walcot drew the weapon from his pocket, and threw it on the table.

'What is it you want of me? *You*, sir'—he turned to Mayne—'who call yourself an English gentleman; I appeal to *you*. I call you to witness that, though I have made no resistance, I protest against this outrage.'

'Who has harmed you?' inquired Mayne, coolly.

'Harmed me? Do you not see that my liberty is threatened? I demand protection of you as a fellow-countryman. This man has induced me by a false representation to come on board this vessel of his, and now prevents my leaving it.'

'The vessel is mine,' answered Mayne, sternly; 'and you will never leave it to set foot on Norwegian shore again.'

'What? Do you mean to murder me, then, out of revenge for a personal grudge? Just because I played that trick on you at Halcombe?'

'It was a very scurvy trick, indeed, Mr. Walcot, since trick you call it; but as to the wrong you did me, it is swallowed up and forgotten in a far greater wrong that you have done to another: a man who trusted in you (which I never did) as a woman trusts her priest, and whose confidence you repaid by a cunning and cruel fraud. As to moving me by soft words, you may spare your breath. I

know you to be a heartless villain; you once played upon the fear of an innocent child. You have doubtless forgotten it—it is lost in the wilderness of your crimes; but if you had never done worse than tyrannise, by help of your perjured tools, over that unhappy boy, so help me Heaven! I would make you suffer for it: for that I would have had you flogged with a rope's end, and then, perhaps, let you go; but, as it is, you have sinned in other ways, and your retribution must be of another kind. That noise you hear is the weighing of the "Ruby's" anchor; she sails to-night for England, and you sail with her.'

Walcot started up in violent agitation. 'What? Would you kidnap me? Do you know that that is a hanging matter?'

'One moment,' interposed the Commodore; '*so is murder!* You must really give up that other pistol, Mr. Walcot. I must trouble you to take it out of your pocket with your left hand, or I shall shatter your right—I draw a dead bead on it as I speak—to a certainty.'

With a frightful curse, Walcot produced a second weapon, and placed it by the side of its fellow.

'Thank you,' continued the skipper, quietly appropriating them both. 'I interrupted you as you were talking about kidnapping, I believe; forgive me, sir, and proceed.'

'I was about to say, Mr. Mayne,' continued Walcot, his pale face grown livid with hate, humiliation, and baffled rage, 'that such a crime as you meditate is held outrageous in every land; that neither in Norway nor England will it meet with palliation, no matter what the motive that actuates you to commit it. This man here, your confederate as it seems, is either ignorant of this, or perhaps reckless of the consequences; but let me tell you that a heavy and disgraceful punishment will most surely fall upon those who remove me hence by force.'

'One must surely risk something, Mr. Walcot, for sixty thousand pounds,' returned Mayne, drily. 'You risked something yourself for the same money.'

'You speak in riddles, Mr. Mayne. I have no such sum as that of which you speak.'

'Well; it may be a few hundreds more or less. Mr. Hayling has the exact figures.'

'Mr. Hayling! What has he to do with my property?'

'Oh! nothing; he has only to do with the property you are holding in trust—let us say—for your brother-in-law. Under the mistaken impression that he was dead—you see I have no wish to be offensive—you administered, it seems, to his will, and filled your own pockets. As you might feel disinclined to empty them in Norway, I am bringing you back to England. There is nothing like one's native air, it is said, to recruit the system—perhaps it may stimulate the conscience.'

'Oh! your intention in thus outraging the laws of nations is to extort money from me, is it?' exclaimed Walcot, bitterly. 'You little know the man you have to deal with.'

'I know something of him,' replied Mayne, coolly; 'and from what I do know, I think,

much as he loves money, he will prefer to part with his ill-gotten gains to enduring twenty years of penal servitude!'

'Ah! I see. You flatter yourself that with the results of this honourable expedition Miss Millicent's dowry will be increased.'

'Indeed, my good sir,' replied Mayne, 'you are paying too great a compliment to my commercial intelligence. I may tell you, in confidence, that if the money were mine, you should have no choice between imprisonment and restitution; I would simply give you up to the police, who have a warrant for your apprehension, the first moment we touched shore; but the interest of other persons have to be consulted.'

'You will find that they will not be much benefited,' sneered the other.

'Very good. In that case my own particular wishes will be gratified, and you will wear a ring round your ankle for life.'

'Ah! there speaks your true nature,' exclaimed Walcot, bitterly. 'Because I humbled

you in the presence of another, you can never forgive me. You are one of those excellent young men of whom I have heard so much, who are incapable of a baseness—till their *amour propre* is wounded.'

This was the best move that Walcot had made yet in the losing game at which he found himself so involuntarily a player. His menaces and his appeals had been alike fruitless; but his suggestion that Mayne's behaviour was actuated by a selfish motive had, though it was untrue, a sting in it: for the young fellow had certainly not forgotten that morning on which Sir Robert had dismissed him in disgrace from Halcombe Hall.

'I don't deny, Ferdinand Walcot,' he replied, 'that I take some personal pleasure in being the instrument of your punishment; but revenge on my own account forms but a small item in my satisfaction. Every one has his little prejudices, and men who ill-treat children and women are my particular abhorrence. You have made a reference to the day on which you

got the better of me at Halcombe; but you omitted to mention that it was through the perjury of an accomplice—Annabel Spence ——'

The face of Mr. Ferdinand Walcot, which had been gradually recovering its native hue, here began to grow leaden again.

'Yes,' continued Mayne; 'she has confessed *all*. Do not flatter yourself that anything you henceforth do, or say, can have the smallest influence on your brother-in-law. He knows you for what you are. I think I need say no more.'

'I do not believe that he knows that this outrage has been committed upon me!' exclaimed Walcot, with a keen look.

'Your judgment of character is as correct as usual,' returned Mayne; 'he does not know it, nor, if he did, would he, in all probability, approve of it.'

Walcot answered nothing, and would fain, no doubt, have concealed the satisfaction that flashed from his eyes.

'Moreover,' continued Mayne, 'he will

never know it, until the money of which you have robbed him has been returned, or you are safely lodged in gaol.'

'That is what the law calls compounding a felony,' observed Walcot, coolly.

'Just so; the law has all sorts of names for all sorts of things, and will fit your case no doubt —though it is an exceptionally bad one—to a nicety. The dilemma to which you refer is a serious one, and has had my best consideration; the result is, that you must make up your mind as to the course you will pursue before you leave this cabin. At present the question is one of mere equity, the responsibility of which (if I am in error) I take entirely on my own shoulders. Once in the hands of the police, who are awaiting your arrival upon English soil, there will be no alternative either for yourself—or for Sir Robert. Of course it will be very painful for him to have to listen in open court to the recital of your deceptions and of his own folly;—you calculated upon that, I see, as your last chance; the last chance is

gone—the Law, which condemns you, will also give him no escape.'

Ferdinand Walcot had a great command of feature, but his jaw had dropped like that of a dead man. There was a long silence; then in a hoarse voice he said, 'What, in the devil's name, is it you want of me?'

'I want—and I mean to have—a full confession of your crimes under your own hand, including the story of the sick man who died at Salton Point, which is still a mystery to us; and also the securities in which you have invested your ill-gotten gains. That is my ultimatum. You have time enough, even with this fair wind'—the yacht was going at great speed, by this time having reached the open water—'to make up your mind before we touch English ground; but having once done so, your decision will be irrevocable. Here are pens and paper; whatever else you wish for shall be at your service; for the rest of the voyage, however, you must excuse my company. It remains with you to decide whether,

when I see you again, you will wear handcuffs or not.'

It was more than an hour after Mayne thus took his leave before the Commodore rejoined his friend upon the deck of the yacht.

'My good friend,' exclaimed Mayne, smiling, 'what on earth have you found to talk about with that scoundrel below stairs? He has the tongue of a serpent, and, if you are not deaf to its charming, will presently convince you of his innocence. For my part, I loathe him so that I could endure his presence no longer.'

'He is a clever cuss, no doubt,' answered the other, drily, 'and also, as you say, very agreeable. He has been so good as to offer me ten thousand pounds to put him ashore anywhere between this and the Sound.'

'I am afraid you would never have got the money,' said Mayne, laughing. 'He is not, strictly speaking, a man of his word.'

'Well, I guess I should,' returned the Commodore, coolly. 'While you were talking to our friend in the cabin, I was watching him

pretty close; it was lucky for you, by the bye, for when you talked of giving him the rope's end he looked snakes, I promise you, and when you said, "She sails to-night for England, and you sail with her," you were within twenty seconds of Eternity. If he had but known how to shoot from his jacket pocket, you'd ha' been there.'

'I know it, Pearce,' answered Mayne, earnestly. 'One of the things I have been thinking about, under the stars here, is what one should say—and do—to a man who had saved one's life.'

'Tut, tut; let that lie where it is. There is no such merit in a man's having sharp eyes; they are tolerably well skinned, mine are, and I noticed that when you mentioned "securities" our friend's fingers went up with a twitch to his side pocket. Moreover, he did not say a word—such as was only to be expected—about the difficulty of paying money in England when one has one's purse in Norway. It was but natural, one would think, under the circum-

stance that he should have asked to go ashore to get it.'

'He knew me by this time better than that, I fancy, Commodore.'

'Very likely; but still it was a chance. And then, again, In ever saw so clever a cuss, and at the same time such an audacious one, so utterly cast down. By the living Jingo, when he offered me that ten thousand pounds it struck me, putting this and that together, like a flash of lightning, "Why, this fellow carries his fortune about with him!" I've known men, bless ye, out West, with forty, fifty thousand dollars in notes in the waistbands of their breeches!'

'But this man?' interrupted Mayne impatiently; 'did anything happen to corroborate your suspicions in this case?'

'Corroborate? Well; I don't know about corroboration,' drawled the Commodore, at the same time transferring a plug of tobacco from the right side of his mouth to the left; 'but here's a pocket-book, which speaks for itself;'

and he produced a russian leather case of great size, both strapped and clasped. 'If that ain't full of money, its full of documents as is worth money, or my name ain't Pearce.'

'But however did you become possessed of it?' inquired Mayne, in amazement.

'Well; I thought he might hide it, like a magpie, in some drawer or locker, or perhaps even drop it out of the cabin window in sheer malice; so I just called in Neale and Jack Bruce "to search a thief," as I told 'em, and Lor' bless yer, in half a minute our friend yonder was as bare as when his mother bore him.'

'Do you mean to say you took it from him by force?' cried Mayne, aghast with horror.

'Well, no; his clothes were on my side of the room, and he was on the other, and I just took it out of his side pocket without any force at all. It is true that he did call it "Robbery with Violence from the Person;" but that only shows what a liar he is.'

'But really, Pearce, I think this was going a little too far,' remonstrated Mayne.

'Wal; give it him back again, and let him drop it into the sea: that is just the devil's trick he will be up to rather than let the man he has wronged come by his own.'

'There is something in that, to be sure,' said Mayne, reflectively. 'Moreover, the first thing the policeman will do to whom he is given in charge will be to search him. You have therefore only anticipated the action of the law.'

'Of course,' observed the Commodore; 'and if we were to hang him at the yard-arm, we should be doing ditto, and saving folks a world of trouble.'

This last observation did not in Mayne's eyes go to strengthen the moral position, but on the whole he judged it better to keep the pocket-book; which, without opening, he placed in an envelope and sealed in the presence of his companion.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE RETURN MATCH.

For twelve days the solitary cabin passenger on board the 'Ruby' continued resolute in his expressed intention of making no terms with 'thieves and kidnappers,' as he ungraciously termed his host and the Commodore; but on the thirteenth morning, when they had come in sight of the white cliffs of Albion, Mr. Pearce announced a capitulation.

'The coon has come down, Mr. Mayne,' he said; 'only he would like to speak a few words with you before he parts with his skin.'

Mayne at once repaired to the cabin, where he found his prisoner looking thin and haggard enough, no doubt from his mental struggles

(for his appetite had been excellent throughout the voyage), but perfectly calm and quiet.

'To the victor belong the spoils,' he said, pointing to the table on which lay a few sheets of manuscript. 'There is my confession, as you will term it: the narrative of how I possessed myself of the property, the whole of which, or nearly so, is already in your hands. Read it.'

The statement was drawn out at some length; but, as we are already acquainted with the principal facts, it is unnecessary to recapitulate them.

Let it suffice to relate what had happened in France and Salton Point.

Although there had been no quarrel between Sir Robert and his brother-in-law at Marseilles, the latter had had reason for suspecting that his influence was on the wane. Every day it became necessary for him to combat the other's scruples as to his conduct towards the family at Halcombe; and now that he had lost the assistance of Annabel Spence, his spiritual weapons were no longer equal to

this task. It was only, as it were, with a dead lift that he had persuaded the Baronet to go to Australia, whither from the very first he had had no intention of accompanying him. He wished to remove him from England for as long a space as possible in order to put a certain plan into execution, which required time for its development. The ship was to touch nowhere on its way to the Antipodes, and the Australian telegraph was out of repair, so that he would have many months before him during which no news, of or from Sir Robert, could reach home. Even with that advantage, the obstacles to accomplishing his purpose might well have deterred a less audacious and reckless spirit. He intended (as, indeed, it happened) to slip away from the ship the very night of its departure, leaving his companion to cross the seas alone; then to forge a certificate of Sir Robert's death and burial in France, and to come home and prove his will, which his position as sole executor and trustee would afford him facilities of doing. But an unexpected event occurred

which offered a much easier method of effecting his object. In Mr. Bevill's 'Reports' from Marseilles, there was mention, it will be remembered, of a certain Mr. Marshall, an invalid, whose acquaintance Walcot had cultivated, and with whom he had greatly ingratiated himself. This man, the victim to a complication of disorders, was in the last stage of illness. Among other things he suffered from, though he had neither kith nor kin, was home-sickness, from which the doctors denied him relief, since his strength was quite unequal to a journey of any kind. 'Let me reach England, if it is only to die,' was his passionate appeal; and in the end it was not made in vain.

After Sir Robert had taken leave of this gentleman, Walcot repaired to his hotel, and, pretending some change of purpose in his own movements, offered to be himself his escort to England. The dying man grasped at this proposal with gratitude and joy. On the same night the 'Artemis' sailed for Melbourne a trader was to start for Weymouth, and on board

this ship, the 'Méduse,' Walcot procured accommodation as for himself and Sir Robert. The invalid was already in such a state that it was to the last degree unlikely that he should be made conscious of the substitution of names; and, indeed, so it happened. The boat that conveyed him from shore called at the last moment for Walcot on board the 'Artemis,' and everything (except Mr. Bevill's witnessing that occurrence, of which, of course, Walcot knew nothing) went as smoothly as could be desired. He found himself in charge of his dying companion on board a vessel manned by foreigners, with whom, even if they had entertained any suspicion, deception was easy.

It was afterwards suggested by some who were made acquainted with these facts, that Ferdinand Walcot never intended to let his charge arrive in Weymouth a living man; that if the device of landing him at Salton Point—which the captain of the ship himself recommended—had not been put in practice, a still darker crime than any which stained Ferdinand

Walcot's soul would have been laid to his charge. But of this doubt let him have the benefit. His companion, as we know, *was* landed at Salton Point, and died there, in his bed—a natural death. Mr. Howard's testimony may be held conclusive upon that point. It was upon the whole a great satisfaction to Walcot to find in this gentleman an old friend of George Gresham's, since, provided only that he did not take upon himself to communicate with the family at Halcombe—in which case all was lost—he had in him secured a witness of the greatest value. All his marvellous powers of pleasing were exerted to win his good word, and, as we are aware, he succeeded in his object. The sick man, although prostrate and almost senseless, was indeed 'an unconscionable time in dying,' and every hour of his existence was of course laden with extreme peril as regarded his companion. When he did die, Walcot wrote at once to Gresham; but returned the letter, which he feigned to drop into the post-office, into his own pocket, his object being to delay

the young man's arrival, if not until the body should be interred, at all events till it should be past recognition. In the meantime, under pretence of going to London on business, he undertook that expedition; to Halcombe, which so nearly resulted in his capture by Mayne and Gresham. It is difficult to account for the rashness of this enterprise; but the probability is that, judging others by himself, and the interests at stake being so enormous, he dreaded lest Sir Robert's will, the secret receptacle of which was known to him, should be discovered and destroyed. Even when he gained possession of it, all was not plain sailing; tardy as was Gresham's arrival, and well as Walcot was acquainted (for he had made it his study) with that young gentleman's sensitive and somewhat fastidious nature, he could not be certain that his ghastly secret might not be discovered after all. For this reason he took occasion to drop a hint or two to the young surgeon of the morbid character of Gresham's mind, and so impressed him with the mischief

likely to result from a visit to his uncle's death chamber, that, as we have seen, he almost dissuaded him from going thither at all, and rendered his momentary presence there merely formal and perfunctory.

When that last difficulty was surmounted, Walcot had merely to carry home what all men believed to be the corpse of his patron, and to enter upon his own inheritance.

Even if Annabel Spence, tired of his delays and excuses, and bereft of her last hope of his making reparation for her wrongs by marriage, had then turned upon him (as she eventually did), and exposed his treachery, he had made sure of his main object—Sir Robert's money.

For all that, Walcot did not lose an hour in realising such portions of his ill-gotten gains as were immediately convertible into cash, so as to be ready for flight at a moment's notice. That he had long ago some well-shaped intention of acting as he had done, seems evident from the fact of the legacies of Gresham and the rest being made payable from the sale of the landed

estate, which otherwise would have deprived him of so much ready money. Why the landed estate had not been disposed of, no matter at what pecuniary sacrifice, seems somewhat inexplicable; perhaps he shrank from beggaring his patron; perhaps, which is more likely, he hesitated to commit a fraud so gigantic, and to punish which, wherever he might hide himself, some unusual means might be resorted to. At all events, with that single exception of the Four-Acre field, in which he showed a tendency to accommodate Mr. Raynes, he made no attempt to sell a rood of ground.

At the end of Mr. Walcot's statement was given an account of the investments, both English and Continental, among which the proceeds of the sale of Sir Robert's stocks and shares had been distributed; a very large amount of the securities themselves were in the pocket-book taken from his person, which likewise contained memoranda as to the rest that put any concealment respecting them out of the question. With none of this, however, did

Mr. Mayne concern himself. No sooner did they anchor off the port than a boat pulled from shore bringing a stout little gentleman with a twinkling eye, but of serious deportment.

'Seeing your yacht in the offing—as I believe it is called—I could not resist, my dear Mayne, from coming on board to shake hands with you, and to take a bit of lunch.'

Nothing could be more natural, or at the same time more opportune. Mr. Sturt happened to be taking a brief marine holiday at Harwich—if you had seen him in his straw hat, and the scanty jacket that afforded such development to his lower limbs, you would have understood that at once; nothing was less like his usual appearance when engaged professionally: but since he *was* there, and an old friend desired his advice upon a business matter, it was of course at his service.

'These securities seem all right,' he said, after he had examined them: 'and if your friend wishes to make them over to his brother-

in-law, for value received (here his eye twinkled more than ever), the affair can be managed in a few days. It's a friendly settlement, as I take it; but these memoranda must be certified.'

'Just so,' replied Mayne; 'and in the meantime my friend will continue to partake of my hospitality.'

Not until the moment came for the final arrangements to be concluded did Mr. Sturt make the personal acquaintance of his new client, though when at Mirton he had been, as we know, within a few miles of him.

'What! Charles Archester!' were his first words upon beholding him.

'Archester or Walcot, it is no matter,' returned the other, sternly. He was doubtless not unprepared for the recognition; but it was noticeable that his hand trembled during the process of signature that followed, as it had never done while he was writing out the confession of his crime.

Nothing more passed between them save

the few grave words that business necessitated; but when the lawyer and Mayne went up on deck, the latter at once expressed astonishment at what had passed below.

'Yes; I knew that man years ago,' said Sturt. 'Nor is it the first time that I have acted for him professionally. I understand now the reason why he was so loth to accompany his brother-in-law to Australia. He had been there before as a convict.'

'A convict!'

'Yes; I was engaged for the defence at his trial; but the proofs against him were overwhelming, and the jury found him guilty without leaving the box; he was a forger. He passed under a false name; but it was understood that he was of good family and great attainments. He was said to have a sister who was passionately attached to him.'

'Poor Sir Robert must never know of this,' sighed Mayne.

'Of course not. Nobody need know save you and me. When I think of what he was

when I first saw him, I could almost find it in my heart to pity the scoundrel.'

'I do pity him,' answered Mayne, softly. 'What a wretched and wasted life!'

'Yes; but how he has wrecked others; remember Annabel Spence. Old Pam used to talk of Rubbish being something valuable in the wrong place. Now Pity in the wrong place is—Rubbish.'

Mayne answered nothing; but murmured to himself those classic lines in which hope is expressed that 'Auld Hornie' may mend his ways, and find things pleasant after all's done.

The thoughtful silence that had fallen upon both men was interrupted by the incisive tones of the Commodore.

'Our friend below, Mr. Mayne, would have a word with you before he starts on his home voyage.'

Walcot had agreed to leave that very afternoon by a Harwich steamer bound for Christiania; indeed, the warrant that was out against him was a sufficient guarantee that he would

never trouble his old acquaintances with his presence in England. Mayne at once repaired to the cabin.

Walcot was standing beside the little table, just where he had left him, with his hands folded across his breast, and his head bowed. He raised it a little on the other's entrance, and addressed him thus :—

'I have done many a base thing in my life, as you are well aware ; but I never yet stooped to ask a favour of an enemy. I am about to do so now.'

'There you are mistaken, Mr. Walcot. I owe you no ill-will upon my own account, nor do I wish you any harm, nor even to be hard upon you.'

'You have your foot upon my neck, that is,' answered the other, grimly, 'yet forbear to tread with your whole weight. Well ; that is something, and shows a certain generosity upon which I am about to trespass. Just now a man came here who recognised me as—as a convict. He told you all about it, I see. Well ; I have

to ask you—to beseech of you—to keep that shameful knowledge from one particular person.'

'That is already granted; rest assured that Sir Robert shall never know it.'

'You are generous, indeed; but I was not thinking of him. Pray, sir, keep it also from the ears of Evelyn Nicoll.'

'Upon my honour, I will.'

'I thank you, sir.'

And after a few more words they parted.

Mayne kept this strange appeal even from Mr. Sturt; but it moved him greatly. He told him, however, what he thought was much to Walcot's credit, that the latter had refused certain pecuniary assistance from him, which he had offered at the last moment, lest poverty should be his excuse for his reverting to dishonest courses.

'You were afraid, I suppose,' said Mr. Sturt, smiling, 'that these fifty-five thousand pounds or so out of the sixty had almost denuded the poor fellow of his cash, or that the eight per cent. commission was not a sufficient recompense

for his pains and trouble? I don't think you need distress yourself. Mr. Ferdinand Walcot is a gentleman, if I am not mistaken, who has feathered his nest whenever the opportunity offered, and to whose hands money has stuck whenever it has passed through them. The very ease with which he disgorged so vast a sum is proof to me that there was plenty more where that came from. However, you did quite right not to squeeze him too tightly. He is not a man to drive into a corner. And I am bound to say you have made a most capital job of it. It was risky—very risky—to the last moment. He could have kept his swag at the expense of his skin at any time. And without a policeman handy, you had no pull upon him whatsoever.'

'Ah! but I had a policeman,' replied Mayne. He whistled shrilly, and, as if from a trap-door upon the stage, there appeared at the top of the companion ladder a guardian of the law in full uniform; stout and serious-looking. He made his salute, and stood at attention.

'Take him away, take him away!' cried Mr.

Sturt, hurriedly turning his back upon this apparition; 'I would not be recognised as being connected with this matter—for, though there is nothing wrong about it, it is very unprofessional, very—upon any consideration whatsoever.'

'But, my dear sir, he knows you perfectly well,' answered Mayne, laughing. 'Policeman X, don't you know this gentleman?'

To the lawyer's horror the apparition nodded assent.

'I know Mr. Sturt, of Burleigh Gardens, as well as my own brother,' said he.

'What does he mean? Damn his impudence! Who is he?' cried the incensed attorney.

'Don't you know your own detective?' cried Mayne, holding his sides with laughter; 'why, it's Mr. Landemann, of Christiania and London.'

'What, Bevill!'

'Yes, sir; it's me,' replied that worthy. 'I came with Mr. Mayne, in case my gentleman down yonder might have any special business

to be done for him by deputy in Norway; and also to make myself generally useful. Between us, I don't think Mr. Mayne and me have forgotten anything, down to these pretty little ornaments'—and he produced from his pocket a pair of handcuffs.

'I see!' exclaimed Mr. Sturt, admiringly. 'You could have given your gentleman a good fright, and yet even at the very last have let him go again. Well, I must say, Mr. Mayne, that this return match of yours has been very well played out from first to last.'

CHAPTER XVIII.

HAPPY HALCOMBE.

THE breaking of Mr. Mayne's news, though it was such good news, to Sir Robert, was a little difficult. It was quite certain that he would never have given his sanction to that 'cutting-out expedition' on which the gallant little 'Ruby' and her captain had been engaged; but now that it was all over, and its end attained, there was not much left for him to object to, especially as his own legitimate share of the prize-money was fifty-five thousand pounds. Mayne told him as much as he thought proper of what had occurred, and was only asked one question.

'Has this unhappy man gone back again?' and on being informed that he was, and for

good and all, the Baronet heaved a sigh of relief.

'This dividend, as you call it (for Mayne had laid great stress upon it not being the whole sum), is as much, more than I expected, as it is more than I deserved, and I hardly know what should be due to you for salvage.'

'Oh! as to that, I shall not take a shilling,' said Mayne, laughing; 'it was a private enterprise entered into for my own satisfaction; and if you will only acquit me of having wanted to escape from matrimony, I shall be more than satisfied with the result. I really had a reason for postponing the happy event, but now——'

'You may be married to-morrow so far as I am concerned, my dear fellow,' interrupted the Baronet; 'and if you won't take the salvage, Milly shall.'

'Indeed, sir, Milly will have enough and to spare,' said Mayne; 'but if I might venture to suggest such a thing, and quite between ourselves, supposing you were to give it to her sister? I am sure that it is what Milly would

wish. Evelyn is going to marry a comparatively poor man, you see.'

'He won't be so poor as you imagine,' answered Sir Robert, drily. 'But your proposal is just what it should be, and like yourself. Well; now for the Yankee. He's a most capital fellow, and, it seems, devised the scheme that has restored to me my property. What can we do for *him?*'

'The Commodore, sir, will take no money; it was with great difficulty that I persuaded him to accept a present from me for which I had no further use. Since I am going to be a Benedict and a landsman, I have given him the "Ruby" to do what he likes with; and he is as pleased as Punch at being captain of his own ship for the first time.'

'At least there is Mr. Bevill,' said Sir Robert.

'Indeed, sir, I am Bevill's own employer, and have been so for some time. I could not allow him to receive *douceurs* from what he would call "another party." If you really do

wish me to suggest a little investment, however, I will.'

'I do,' said the other, impatiently.

'Well, sir, there is Annabel Spence. She has a claim upon a certain person which has never been acknowledged, and she has been cruelly wronged by him. I could scarcely appear in such a transaction myself after the imputation the young lady was induced to put upon me, but if you—having long ago, as I feel sure, forgiven her trespass against you—would settle a thousand pounds or so upon her; she has no friend, poor girl, nor home——'

'Not another word, Mayne; you are quite right. "Let byegones be byegones" is a principle that I above all men have need to practise. The girl shall be well provided for; though, as to a home, I understand she will remain with Evelyn.'

From that hour, in spite of some previous prejudice, Mayne stood in Sir Robert's favour only second to his nephew and the Curate. This was not because by his sagacity and vigour

he had saved so much for him, as Mr. Sturt expressed it, 'out of the fire'—for mere material matters had never weighed with him as with most men—but on account of the magnanimity and tenderness he had exhibited towards others, and also, without doubt, of the tact and delicacy with which he had narrated his late adventure. He had referred so slightly to the object of it, that that feat of reciting *Hamlet* without any allusion to the Prince of Denmark had almost been accomplished; for the name of Ferdinand Walcot was gall and wormwood and bitter aloes to his listener, and was never uttered save with bated breath beneath the roof of Halcombe Hall. One great advantage of this antipathy in the case of the Master of the House was that it cast a deep shadow of doubt upon certain matters in which this man had affected to be his guide; in other words, the Apostleship of Ferdinand Walcot having been proved utterly false and fraudulent, he began to entertain no little suspicion of the truths of his Gospel. As time went on he learnt to cherish

the memory of his departed wife without seeking to lift the veil which Heaven has placed, doubtless for their common happiness, between the Living and the Dead.

As to his relations with those about him, they became more tender and gracious than they had ever been. Dyneley used to say that it seemed to him that Sir Robert almost fulfilled the dream that supposes one to have returned from beyond the grave purged from earthly follies, and convinced that the only true happiness lies in conferring happiness on others. At all events, in so doing, Sir Robert passed the remainder of his days. Moreover, having tried and faithful folks to deal with, he did not make those mistakes into which, in the practice of their benevolence, the most well-intentioned men so often fall.

There were no three happier couples, nor better suited to one another, than those who looked up to him as to a common father.

The union of Dyneley with Evelyn and of Mayne with Millicent took place, as Sir Robert

had promised himself, on the same day; by which time Gresham and his bride had returned to Halcombe to fill up the gap in that loving household made by their temporary absence.

But Mayne and his wife were often at the Hall; and Mr. and Mrs. Dyneley settled at the Manor House, as had been agreed upon. In every sense there was never a more 'united family' than that at Halcombe; or a more paternal government than of its ruler. The despotism of the Great Baba, indeed, was inflexibly maintained; but then everybody loved him as the Russians used to love their Czar.

The double marriage was celebrated with much greater *éclat* than that of Gresham and his wife had been, for Sir Robert had now gained courage to face his world—though it was but a small one. All his friends and neighbours were accordingly invited—a circumstance that would scarcely have been worth mentioning, but that a difficulty arose as to one of them in whom we have taken a passing

interest. There was no doubt of his being a neighbour, both in a scriptural and local sense, but there was a very grave doubt as to whether he should be a wedding guest. It had always, it will be remembered, been a question whether Mr. and Mrs. Raynes, of The Laurels, should or should not be reckoned among the County Society; and, though Sir Robert and his lady had decided in their favour, a certain circumstance had recently come to light which rendered this nice point still nicer. This was no less than the discovery of what Mr. Raynes had been before he had taken up the *rôle* of country gentleman—a problem that had defied the intelligence of the neighbourhood for many a year. Even the subtle young people who guessed the double acrostics in the county paper had been foiled in this. How it was solved, I know not; but, somehow or other, it did percolate down to Mirton Moor that Mr. Raynes had made his money as a clown in a circus. The instant that the fact was divulged, every one recognised its fitness. What man *out*

of a circus had ever been seen to grin like Mr. Raynes? His wife had been the Columbine in the same travelling company, by the way; but that was nothing: the circumstance of the Mirton churchwarden having been a clown outweighed and overpowered every other feeling in the public mind; even the Master of Halcombe's experiences of the other world paled beside it.

Of course, as Mr. Raynes paid higher wages to his labourers than any other employer, it was one of his own men who first threw his late profession into his teeth. Hodge and he had had some words about turf-cutting, which ended in the son of the soil losing his temper, and saying, 'Well; at all events I was never a fool in a circus.'

'Well, I *was*,' admitted the other, frankly, 'and got 600*l.* a year by it. I wonder how long the sort of fool that you are would take to realise that income?'

The young folks at Halcombe very much applauded this reply; but Lady Arden was

dreadfully shocked at the revelation of Mr. Raynes's past, and I hardly think would have got over it (so far as to ask him to the wedding, at least) but for her husband's advocacy of his claim to their hospitality.

'He is an honest man with a kind heart,' was Sir Robert's own view of the matter; 'and as to his having been a fool, I know a much bigger one, and who, instead of gaining a livelihood by his folly, almost lost a fortune.'

THE END.

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